

GREEN SAILORS, BEWARE!

being

The fourth book of the adventures of Mark, Mary, Binnie and Ben, with their Uncle George in his famous boat, *Rag Doll* (and not forgetting Polly-the-Parrot). In this chronicle it is revealed that even in the world of pleasure boats there are bad people, as well as good, and that the dangers of the sea are little compared with the violence of the enemy.

By the same Author

The "Green Sailors" Adventures

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NO LESS RENOWNED
ONE-ONE-ONE
SIXTEEN BELLS

GREEN SAILORS, BEWARE!

The Fourth Green Sailors Adventure

by

Gilbert Hackforth-Jones

Illustrated by

Jean Main and David Cobb, R.O.I.

HODDER AND STOUGHTON

*The characters in this book are
entirely imaginary and have no
relation to any living person*

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To
COSETTE

our faithful and beautiful 12-ton Auxiliary Sloop, who has taken us about the English Channel so many times, and in whom so many of the adventures, related in this and other books, first took place.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Well, here's number four, based as usual on last year's radio plays in the Children's Hour.

Once again my grateful thanks to Mr. David Davis, and all the clever actors who brought it all to life.

Mill Creek is still an imaginary river and everybody mentioned in this book is equally so, except perhaps *Rag Doll*—bless her—only that's not her name.

G. H-J.

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Chapter One

BEWARE OF STRANGERS

I THINK," said Ben, for the hundredth time, "that this is the slowest train in the world and that there are far too many people in it."

The Greens were huddled in the corridor of the Wearmouth train, which was packed with holiday-makers. Their small bundles of luggage provided some sort of sitting accommodation, but Ben refused to sit, because his eyes were then below the level of the window and he could only see the tops of the telegraph poles as they went past in a mournful procession. So he remained sometimes on his feet and sometimes on the feet of his unfortunate neighbours, as he hopped and jumped to pass the time.

Standing just behind him was an elderly well-dressed man, who had already suffered a great deal from Ben's activities. Nevertheless he preferred to remain where he was. Mary Green, who was wise enough to hold very definite opinions of what constituted nice people, had decided that this gentleman was far from nice. Because of this and because she was pretty certain in her mind that he was waiting for an opportunity to join in the Greens' private conversation, Mary was very anxious to stop Ben from inflicting himself on this strange person—but all to no avail, for as the train drew into the outskirts of the New Forest Ben was so excited by the view that he skipped frantically in the air and landed with a squelch on the stranger's feet.

"Young man," said the stranger, "kindly get off my feet. You are, to coin an original phrase, treading on my pet corn."

"Sorry, sir," said Ben. He wriggled terribly and craned his head to see what was coming.

"If you do that," said Mary, "you'll get a cinder in your eye."

"No I won't," said Ben.

"I think the little lady is right"—came the smooth voice of the stranger; "what is it that you are so anxious to see, my friend?"

"Wearmouth Station of course," said Ben.

"I expect it will still be there when the train arrives," said the stranger.

"Of course it will," said Binnie.

"Then," said the stranger, "I suggest that you allow events to take their natural course, instead of going half-way to meet them. A hot cinder in the eye can be a serious matter—especially at the beginning of a holiday. I presume you are going on a holiday—eh?"

He addressed himself to Mary who was trying to be cold and distant. In this she wasn't being very successful because it's very difficult to be cold and distant to a person who is practically touching you in a very hot railway carriage. "Yes we are," she said.

"Ah," said the stranger, "sailing, no doubt, eh?"

"Rather," said Ben, before anyone else had time to answer. "We're going to France in *Rag Doll* with Uncle George and Polly-the-Parrot!" With that announcement he gave a tremendous jump and landed with both feet on the stranger's patent-leather boots. A spasm of pain passed across his face, but he uttered no word of reproach. Instead he said: "France! All by yourselves? What part of France?"

After that the matter was out of Mary's hands. Binnie and Ben fell over each other in trying to describe what sort of trip they were going to take—where they had been before, and where they were going again, so that in a very short time the stranger knew all about them and *Rag Doll* and Uncle George and even Polly-the-Parrot.

Mary was a good deal put out, though she couldn't say why, for the stranger was kindness itself. And yet Mary was wondering; there was something a bit too oily about

the stranger and he was showing a bit more than polite curiosity about the future movements of *Rag Doll*. She turned to confide her doubts and fears to her brother Mark when suddenly she heard a voice which had as pleasant a ring in it as the stranger's had not. It was high-pitched and nasal, and belonged without doubt to Loopy Lomas.

"Well, well," said Loopy; "look who's here! If it isn't the whole Green family. How dy'e, folks! You remember me, don't you, Mary? Loopy Lomas!"

"Of course," said Mary.

"Not likely to forget you," said Mark. "What are you doing in this train?"

"Same as you, I guess," said Loopy; "no one would travel in this darned awful train unless there was something worth doing when they got there."

"Another of your crew?" asked the stranger, putting his long nose well forward, and before Mary could answer Binnie and Ben had told him how Loopy had fallen out of the air into the sea—how they had rescued him in *Rag Doll* and how in a series of mishaps *Rag Doll* had been very nearly wrecked.*

The stranger listened intently and then gave the newcomer a good looking over. There was something about his manner that stung Loopy into an attitude of dislike for the inquisitive fellow. "Say," he said, "you'll know me again when next you see me, mister, won't you? Have I got a smut on my nose, or have I? My name's Lomas—what's yours?"

The stranger hesitated for a moment before answering. And then he said: "My dear fellow—you must pardon me. I'm short-sighted, that's all. I didn't mean to stare at you, I assure you."

"My name's Lomas," went on Loopy; "what's yours?"

"Paggott," said the stranger; "my friends call me Percy."

* *Green Sailors, Ahoy!*

"Well, Mr. Paggott," said Loopy, "guess we'll know each other the next time we meet. So long!"

To everybody's intense surprise Mr. Paggott edged away down the corridor, and they were able to turn to their old acquaintance whom, to their surprise, they found themselves delighted to see again. As Mary said afterwards: "It's funny how pleased and excited one gets when you suddenly run across someone with whom you once shared an adventure—even though at the time it wasn't a very nice adventure! The last time we saw Loopy Uncle George said that if he never saw him again it would be too soon and we rather agreed with him, but now—well—Loopy is Loopy—that's all I can say—you simply just like him whatever he does—and he usually does something to get everybody into trouble. Dear Loopy!"

With this enchanting companion to pass the time Wearmouth Station suddenly popped up alongside them and there was Uncle George standing in the same place on the platform and they knew that another golden holiday was about to begin.

They clustered round him, all talking at the same time, until he had to call for silence. Then he inspected the luggage—sent Ben back for one duffle-bag which he had forgotten, inquired about the tickets and helped Mary to find them—answered seventeen more questions about *Rag Doll* and Polly-the-Parrot and then, looking round, saw Loopy!

The tall young Canadian grinned, and held out his hand.

"You remember me, Commander?"

Uncle George's face was a study in uncertainty. For a moment he looked as if he thought that the Greens had invited Loopy to join *Rag Doll*; then his own common sense told him that they would never have done that, and his face cleared. He took Loopy's hand and said: "I remember you very well, Loopy. Very well. Too well."

Loopy grinned again. "You're not still mad at me for what happened last time we met?"

"Of course not," said Uncle George, "but what are you doing here—going sailing?"

"He's taking a course of instruction," said Binnie, first with the news as ever.

"H'm," said Uncle George. "And who is your fortunate host?"

"He's answered an advertisement, haven't you, Loopy?" said Binnie.

"Sure," said Loopy. He felt in his pocket and produced a scrap of newsprint, which he handed to Uncle George.

"Sailing Without Tears," ran the advertisement. "South Coast Yachtsman takes pupils in his well-found yacht. Everything taught, from Deep Sea Navigation to knotting and splicing. Learn the easy way." He handed back the paper. "I've seen that before," he said. "Wouldn't be a chap called Pingleton, would it?"

"Yea," said Loopy, "that's the guy—is he a friend of yours?"

"Not exactly," said Uncle George, "but I know about him. Would you think me inquisitive if I asked you how much Mr. Pingleton charges for his course of instructions?"

"Well," said Loopy, "there's a coin called a guinea in your British currency which I've never been able to locate. Seems this guy likes to be paid in guineas."

"How many guineas?" asked Uncle George.

"Twenny per week," said Loopy.

Uncle George whistled. "That's a lot of money—twenty-one pounds, my friend. I hope you will be given full value."

"So do I," said Loopy, "but he seems a very thorough gentleman—does Mr. Pingleton, and I want to do the thing properly. You see, ever since I sailed with you I've had an itch to sail my own boat. I've got an idea of going for a long, long sail; but before I do that I realise I need to know just a little bit more about the whole thing than I do now."

"Very wise," said Uncle George.

"So you're thinking of taking a cruise?"

"Yea," said Loopy. "Right round this little old world, I guess, and back to Toronto—my home. How's that?"

Uncle George grinned. "Very enterprising. I hope you will be successful. Are you going alone? Or will you take a companion or two?"

Loopy shook his head. "First things first. I've got to learn how to do it. Then I've got to buy a boat."

"Ah," said Uncle. "Have you thought of a suitable craft?"

"Oh boy, have I thought of a boat! I put an advertisement in one of the papers and got seven hundred and forty-nine answers. Seems that everybody wants to sell me a boat. Maybe they think I'm a mug, Commander?"

"I didn't say it, Loopy," said Uncle; "but I'd be careful if I were you. There are a lot of unsound vessels for sale to unsuspecting foreigners."

"We'll help him, Uncle, won't we?" said Mary.

"I would greatly appreciate your advice," said Loopy, "when the time comes to purchase a suitable craft."

Uncle grinned. "If it's advice you want you'll find me as willing as the rest of 'em to give it."

"That's real kind," said Loopy. "I won't forget that. So long!" He strode away and they followed with their bags in more leisurely fashion.

"Shopping first," said Uncle, "and then ho! for the open sea. Tra-la!"

"Cherbourg!" said Binnie. "What fun! Perhaps we'll see Mr. Paggott!"

"Paggott?" echoed Uncle George. "Where have I heard that name before?"

"I don't know," said Mary, "but if I never saw him again I wouldn't mind. I didn't like him a bit." She told Uncle about the inquisitive stranger, but not for long, for Joe was waiting with the lorry—and conversation with Joe driving was very difficult.

Anyway the thought of going aboard *Rag Doll* and sailing the very next day for France, was sufficient to drive out of their minds any chance encounters with strangers in trains. Only Mary kept thinking of Mr. Paggott and when she did she shivered.

Chapter Two

A FIRST VIEW OF MR. PINGLETON

SHOPPING with Uncle George was as different as it could be from the usual visits to the grocer's at home; for whereas Mrs. Green, or even Captain Green, would first of all inquire the price of each commodity and give serious thought to whether it was worth the money, Uncle had a wholesale manner which should have been a joy to all tradespeople. He ordered in dozens first, and inquired the price afterwards. "Cheaper in the long run," he observed as he ordered a gross of best quality eggs; "you can't sign on a crew of hungry youngsters and watch 'em starve to death." Then he added a large box of chocolate biscuits, some peaches and half a dozen Swiss Rolls to an already staggering order. "You never know in a sailing-boat," he said. "Just as well to have plenty of good wholesome food. Oh! and a couple of dozen bananas to fill in the cracks, please!"

"No bananas!" said the shop assistant, primly. "At least," she added, "I can only let you have four."

"I wouldn't deprive you of them, madam," said Uncle. "I see a barrow in the street groaning with them!" He gathered up his purchases and loaded them into Joe's lorry. Then, because he was feeling in great good spirits he walked over to the barrow and after buying enough bananas for his own use, took another dozen and laid them on the counter of the shop. "A humble tribute from a regular customer," he said solemnly. "I don't like to think of this establishment being devoid of bananas. Kindly credit my account with the value of the fruit. Good day."

He went out with his crew of chuckling Greens and they clambered into the lorry, leaving a puzzled shop assistant turning over the fruit as if she had never seen a banana before.

Joe was in rattling good form at the wheel of the lorry and if Uncle George and Mary hadn't nursed the eggs they would have arrived in omelet condition. As it was all the Greens were well shaken up by the time Joe drew up at the water's edge; Ben and Binnie had hiccups and Uncle George's teeth went on chattering on the stem of his empty pipe for quite a while.

It was a lovely day: hot and windless. The tide was high and the boats in the creek were mirrored in the glassy calm surface of the water.

As the popping and rattling of Joe's lorry died away in the distance different sounds came to the ear, and far more pleasant ones they were. The sea-gulls were wrangling as usual with each other, complaining bitterly that the high tide was wetting their favourite roosting spots in the marshes. An occasional curlew, uttering its plaintive cry, patrolled the river, while on the Hard itself a parcel of schoolchildren were having a water-fight. It was all very summery, and the Greens were longing to get on board *Rag Doll* as soon as possible.

Rag Doll's dinghy was found and launched—they all got in with their baggage and food, and then, with Uncle George on the centre thwart, dipping the paddles in leisurely fashion, they set off down the river in the same way as they always did at the beginning of every holiday. And Uncle George always seemed to say the same thing as they progressed towards the object of all their thoughts. "Someone is rocking the boat," he said; "and I'll hazard a guess that it's you, Ben."

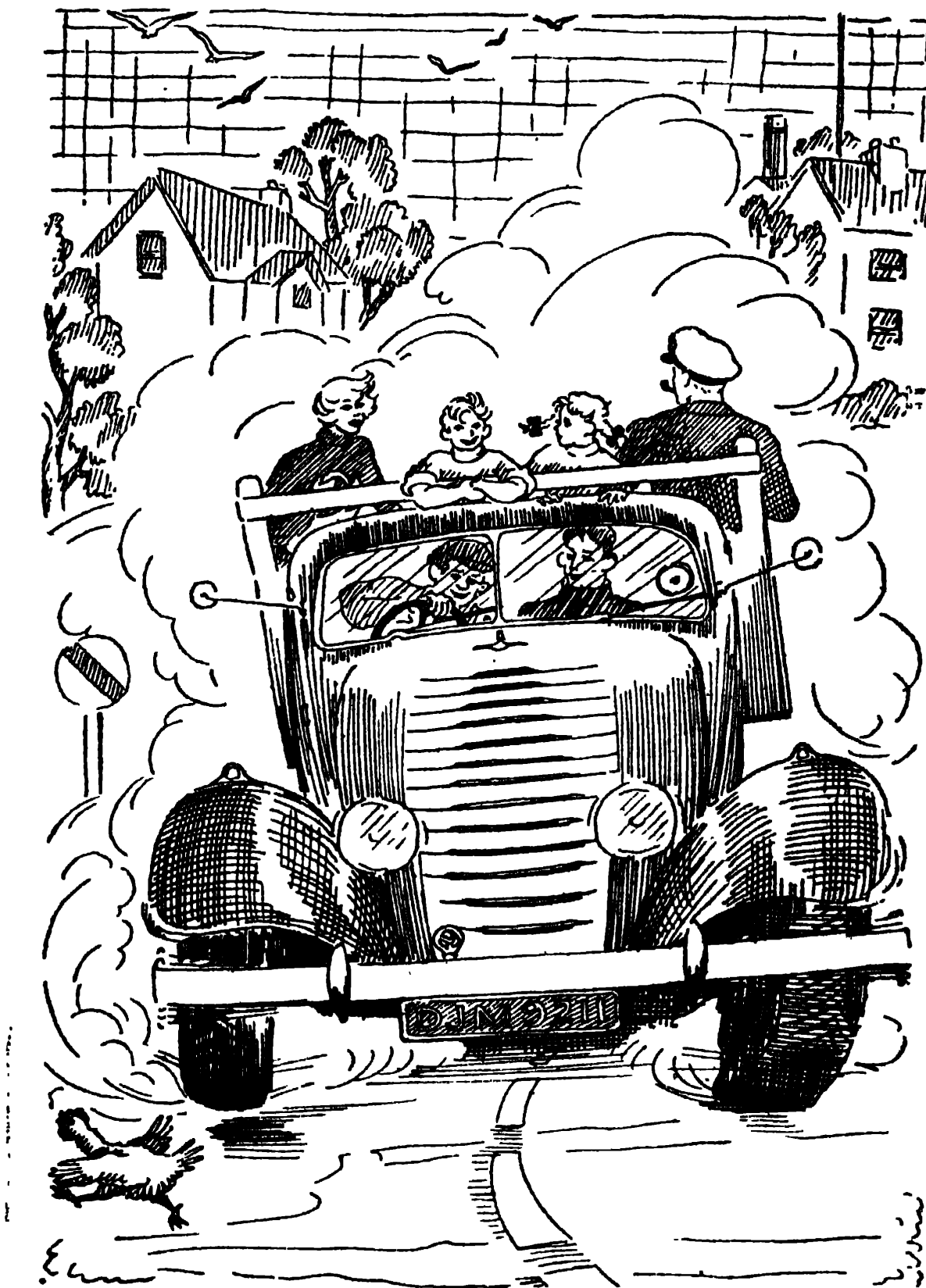
"Sorry, Uncle!" Ben's reply was automatic. He wasn't sorry at all and continued to twist and turn in his efforts to catch a first glimpse of *Rag Doll*.

"I can see her," he said; "she's looking smashing!"

"No doubt. No doubt," said Uncle, laying on his oars, "but for goodness' sake sit still. I can't row this boat unless you keep her trimmed!"

"Sorry, Uncle," said Ben.

Slowly they progressed, and as they got further down the



Joe was in rattling good form.

river everything seemed to be much quieter. It was such a lovely scene that it seemed a pity to spoil it by a lot of chatter, so they sat dreamily in the little boat waiting for the moment when they would be able to get aboard the yacht which they had talked, dreamed and written about ever since their last holiday aboard with their uncle.

Presently, as they neared their destination, they passed an ancient-looking craft on whose deck stood Loopy. Loopy was looking rather dejected, they thought. He was being lectured to by a short, fat little man, with a grey beard which wagged as he spoke.

"So that's Mr. Pingleton!" said Mark. "And what a shocking old boat that is!"

"*Fallen Star*," grunted Uncle George; "a good name for an old Clumbungie like that."

Ben pounced on the new word. "What's Clumbungie, Uncle?" he asked, in his shrill voice.

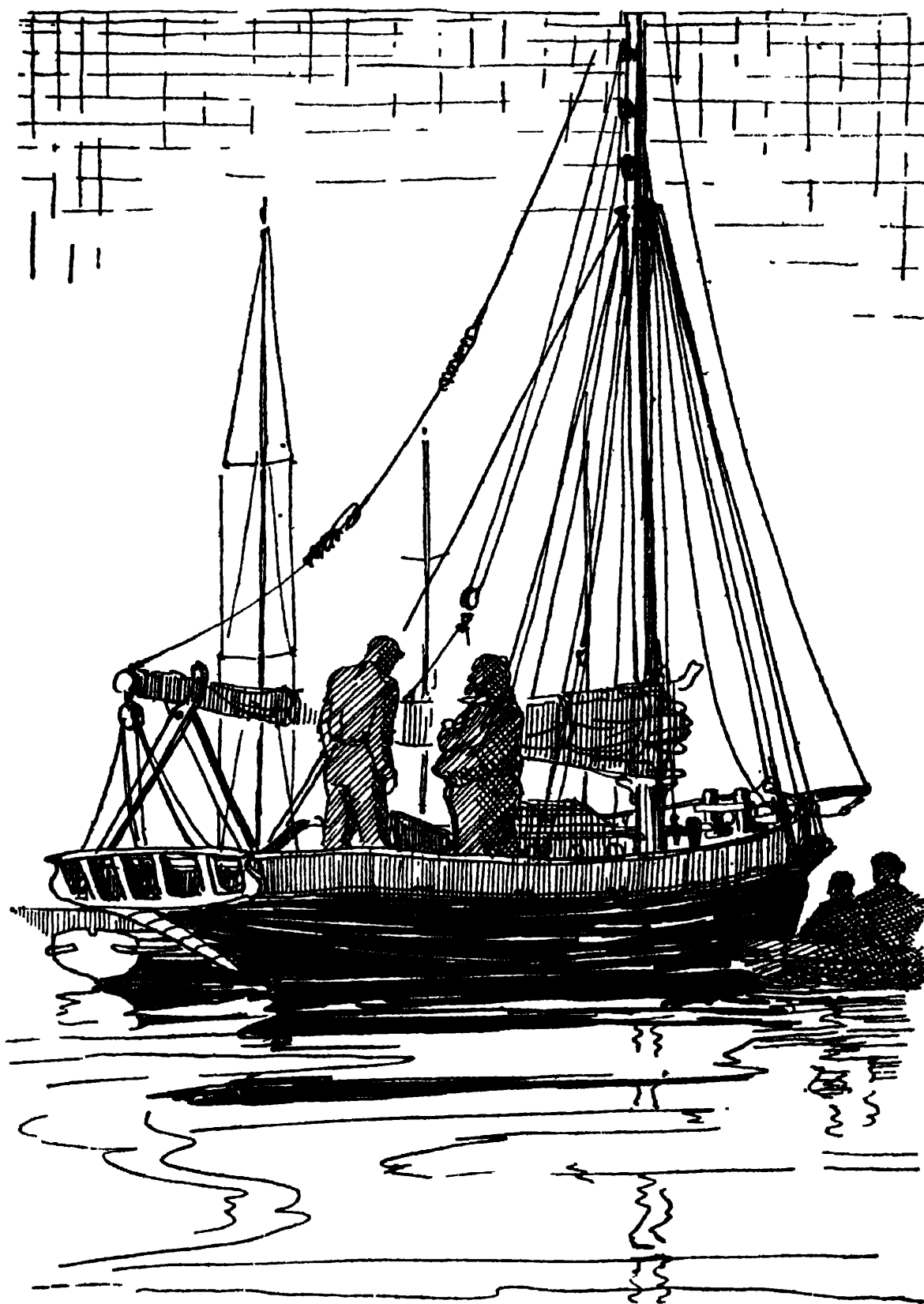
"Hush, child!" said his uncle. "Your voice is inclined to carry over the water, and we don't want to cause offence. You ask me what is a Clumbungie. Well——" He lay on his oars again and pointed with the stem of his pipe: "See that boat over there—straight-stemmed, gaff-rigged, bowsprit half as long as the rest of the boat, rigging in bights, topsides painted with tar, sails made of corrugated iron, rust dripping from every seam, down by the stern, up by the bow, coal fires in every saloon, water laid on to every bunk—flush-decked and smells of fish? That, my child, is a Clumbungie, as I know it. *Fallen Star*! 'Well-found yacht,' he called her in his advertisement, the rascal! Twenty guineas a week! Why—twenty guineas is about all she's worth!"

"Poor Loopy," said Mary, "and to add insult to injury Mr. Pingleton is being unkind to him—listen!"

"Now, Mr. Lomas, remember this! There's a right way and a wrong way to do every single thing and you're doing everything the wrong way!"

"Is that so, Mr. Pingleton," came Loopy's voice.

"That's another thing you've done wrong!" said Mr.



An ancient-looking craft, upon whose deck stood Loopy

Pingleton. "Call me 'Sir' or 'Captain' but *not* Mr. Pingleton. Learn the custom of the sea. Get it right to start with."

"Yes, sir," said Loopy.

"Now," said Mr. Pingleton, "what you've got to do is to forget every mortal thing you ever knew about boats and begin again. Do you follow?"

"Sure," said Loopy.

"We'll start you scrubbing decks first. Harden up your muscles for a few days."

"A few days!" said Loopy; "when do we sail?"

"All in good time," said Mr. Pingleton; "scrubbing, painting, brightwork, rigging, pumping, scraping——" His voice died away as Uncle rowed down the river.

No one spoke for a moment, and then Ben said: "Twenty guineas for that! What a proper swindle! Fancy having to scrub decks for days and days and days!"

"Sit still," ordered Uncle; "if you rock the boat I'll put you to work, like Loopy."

"He wouldn't!" said Ben. "Would he Mary?"

"Would you, Uncle?" asked Mary.

"I might," said Uncle gravely, "if you gave me twenty guineas!"

And so they came to *Rag Doll* and got aboard her with much enthusiasm.

Further out to sea, a large motor-cruiser was getting under way. Standing near the bridge watching, through binoculars, the dinghy as it disembarked its contents, stood the figure of a man which Mary recognised. She gave a little cry. "Look, Uncle! Look! Isn't that Mr. Paggott?"

Uncle looked up. "Yes, probably, what of it?" he said, slightly nettled at the fact that Mary, instead of admiring *his* beautiful ship, was looking at another boat altogether.

"He was watching us," said Mary breathlessly.

"Nothing surprises me about people who go in motor-cruisers," said Uncle briefly. "They've nothing else to do but watch other people. Now pass up those eggs and come down below. I've something to show you all!"



“Now——” said Mr. Pingleton.

Chapter Three

UNCLE'S NEW TOY

IT was a box-like contraption, painted with shining enamel and liberally studded with dials and knobs.

"Ooh," said Binnie; "it's a television set!"

"Don't be a clot," said her elder brother amiably; "it's a radio, isn't it, Uncle?"

"It's pretty well everything," said Uncle George, "*except* a television set. With it one can listen in to all the wavelengths in existence—one can also obtain directional bearings of such things as lighthouses, and as if that isn't enough you can ring up your friends in their own homes. I don't know why I got it!"

"Why did you, Uncle?" said Binnie. "You've always been rather old-fashioned about things like that. It's a pity it isn't a television set," she added.

"I didn't exactly buy it," said Uncle George; "I won it in a raffle. But now we've got it we might as well make use of it."

"Can I put it on now?" asked Binnie.

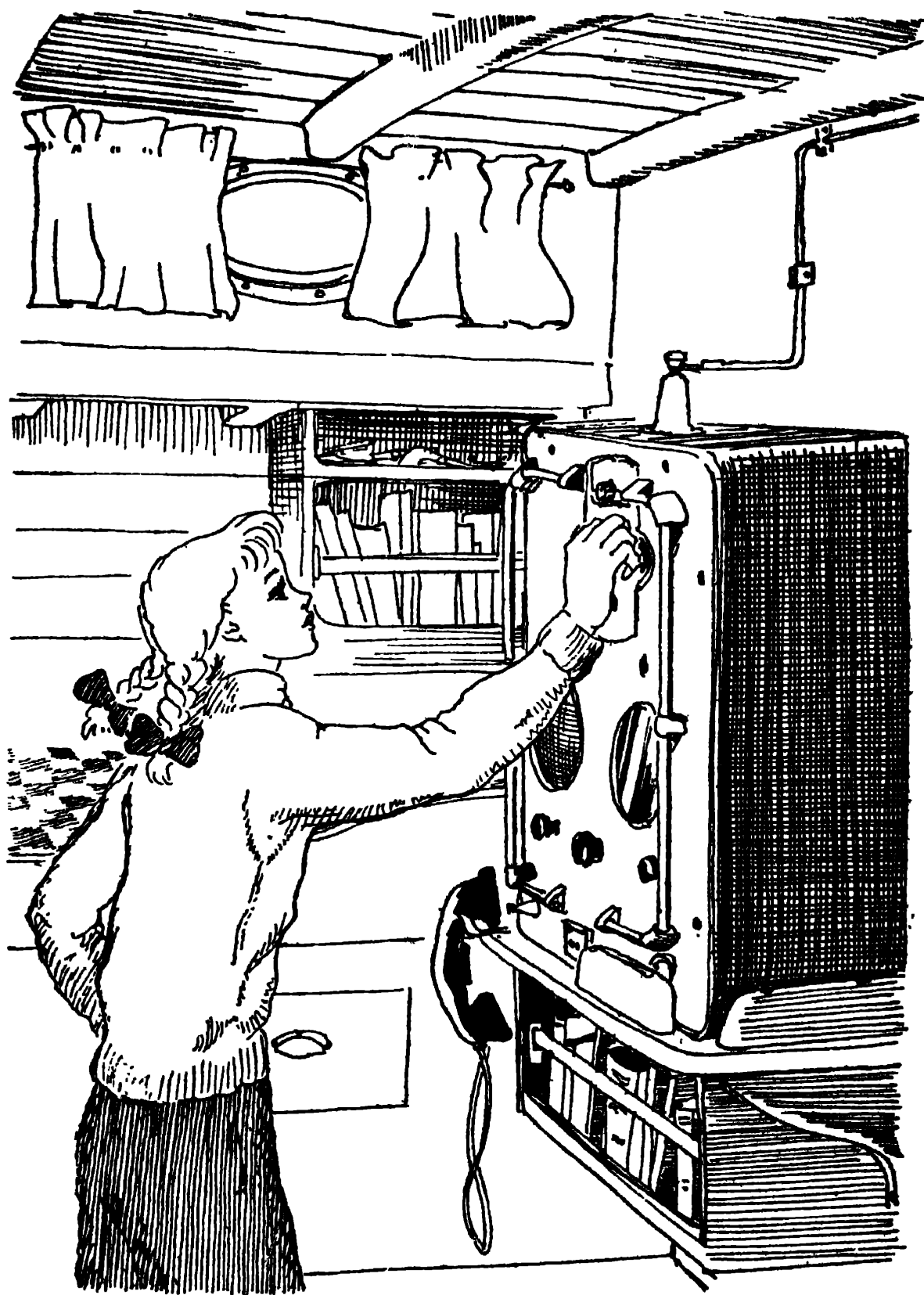
"Just for a moment," said Uncle, "but for goodness' sake don't have it on when you're not listening to it. I can't abide the habit of keeping on the radio as if it were a dripping tap."

Binnie turned the knob marked "Radio" and suddenly they heard—"Hullo, Children, this afternoon we have a concert for two pianos—a harp and a bassoon——"

"Not this afternoon, thank you, David," said Mary and switched it off. It didn't sound exciting enough.

"What about ringing up Mummy?" said Mary. Uncle shook his head.

"Too expensive," he said, "but we'll call up *Bluebell*.



‘It was a box-like contraption . . .’

That won't cost anything. Podsnap has got one of these gadgets too. Press that button there, Mary, and then take off the receiver. While you're talking you hold that lever down, and when you've finished talking you release the lever and say 'Over.'"

Mary took off the receiver. "Hullo, Mr. Podsnap," she said; "this is me, Mary Green." There was a frightful squeaking noise which roused Polly-the-Parrot into a storm of invective. "Down with the government!" she said—"Useless lot! Useless lot! Go to blazes. Go to blazes!"

Ben was delighted. "Did you hear that, Uncle?" he said. "That's something new from last year!"

"Yes," said Uncle, "she spent the winter with Joe and has absorbed his politics. Can't you get that thing to work, Mary? Let me have a try."

Mary relinquished the telephone and Uncle began in a brisk professional manner. "*Rag Doll* calling *Bluebell*. *Rag Doll* calling *Bluebell*. Over!"

Again another squeak and then a voice with a pronounced Scottish accent said: "We've a few herrings but very little else. It's a bad business."

"Who was that?" asked Mary, completely mystified. Uncle switched off and explained that they had picked up a fishing trawler's conversation.

"You hear all sorts of curious things," he said; "it's far better than the B.B.C." He switched it on again and called *Bluebell*. But there was no answer. "Go on deck, Mark, and give him a hail—tell him we're calling him." Mark did as he was told and suddenly *Rag Doll's* saloon echoed with the familiar voice of Francis Podsnap, owner and skipper of *Bluebell*—their deadly rival and sister-ship.

"Hullo, Green Sailors! Hullo, Green Sailors!" came his unmusical tones. "Podsnap of *Bluebell* calling! Welcome to Mill Creek. Over!"

"Go on, Binnie," said Uncle, delighted in spite of himself with the new toy; "say something."

"What shall I say?" asked Binnie.

"Anything you like."

Binnie took the telephone and after deep thought she said: "Hullo, Mr. Podsnap, it's me."

"Who's me?" came the answer.

"Binnie Green."

"Who's Vinegar?" Binnie went into fits of laughter and they heard Mr. Podsnap say rather abruptly: "One must make allowances for their extreme youth." Then there was a click. Mr. Podsnap had hung up. Binnie ran up on deck and hailed *Bluebell*.

"It was me, Binnie," she called.

"Ah!" said Mr. Podsnap. "That's better, I can hear you now. How are you, my dear? Come to plague your uncle again, eh?"

"Isn't he a toad!" said Ben. "Do we plague you, Uncle?"

"I don't think plague is the right word," said Uncle George, "and while we're thinking of a better one let's have a swim."

A few minutes later they were all in the water, kicking and squealing and ducking each other—all, that is, except Polly who sat in her cage and muttered terrible things about the talking box which was threatening to steal her thunder. "Useless lot!" she said. "Useless lot."

Across the water a tired and disgruntled Loopy watched their antics for a while until Mr. Pingleton came on deck and reproached him for idleness. "We've got to make a seaman of you," he cackled. "Must give you your money's worth, you know."

Loopy gave a weak sort of grin and went on with the back-breaking job of hand-scrubbing *Fallen Star's* splintery old deck. This was not his idea of yachting but he told himself he must be patient. Mr. Pingleton was a very thorough gentleman. Perhaps tomorrow the instructional work would be more interesting. He scrubbed steadily on until he was called below. It was time, said Mr. Pingleton, to peel the potatoes.

Meanwhile in *Rag Doll's* saloon a committee meeting was being held with Uncle George in the chair and everybody

talking at the same time. The item they were supposed to be discussing was what sort of a cruise they were going to embark on for their holidays. They all had different views which ranged from Scandinavia to Spain. Uncle George allowed them to natter away for quite a time before he made his contribution.

"I've got to be in this country in a week's time," he said regretfully. "Even I have to work occasionally. So we shall have to split the holiday up into phases. I propose that for phase one we stick to the original plan I wrote to you about and nip across the Channel to Cherbourg. We can spend a few days over there and then we'll come back, and while I'm conducting my business affairs we'll tune up for racing at Cowes. After a week at Cowes we'll sail down west and enjoy the beauty of the Helford River and other such-like spots. How's that?"

It sounded pretty attractive. The motion was carried without dissent. "All right," said Uncle George; then that's the plan. Any questions?"

"When do we start?" asked Mark.

"First light tomorrow morning," said Uncle, "and we'll get ready for sea tonight."

Chapter Four

CROSS CHANNEL

IT was a lovely fine morning when the alarm-clock got them up. There had been a heavy dew in the night and a light breeze was blowing from off the land, as clear an indication of continuing fine weather as there could be. All down the river lay every sort of yacht, each with its dinghy lying astern of it. *Fallen Star* also showed signs of activity. Loopy was up washing down the decks with little conviction. He saw the Green Sailors getting ready to sail and gave a sad little wave. But they were far too preoccupied to think of even looking at him. They had had enough experience now to feel a little funny in their stomachs at the thought of making a passage across the Channel. They knew that before they again entered harbour all sorts of adventures might come their way. They all liked adventures, of course, especially Binnie, but all the same they had that dry feeling in the mouth such as one has before going in to bat, or waiting for the gun to start a race.

Uncle George, too, was silent. The early morning was never a favourite period for him. He was inclined to be a little short with the Greens if they made conversation with him and so they nipped about quietly and waited for his early-morning gloom to be dissipated by the first rays of the rising sun.

Presently Mark was able to pull his forelock to Uncle George and report "Ready for Sea." Uncle grunted and said "All right. Up mainsail and stand by to slip."

With a will the Greens clapped on to the halyards and got the mainsail well and truly hoisted. As it crept up to the mast-head the gentle breeze made it flap and *Rag Doll*

began to shiver like a restive steed, waiting to go. She hadn't long to wait. Uncle George got his pipe going and said shortly: "Let go! Up staysail."

Mark threw the mooring buoy and chain clear of the bows, Ben and Binnie hoisted the staysail and Mary stood by in the cockpit to sheet it home. The breeze caught and filled it, blowing *Rag Doll's* bow off the wind so that immediately the mainsail stopped flapping and also began to fill. *Rag Doll* leaned over, Mary hauled on the sheets and the yacht began to move towards the open sea. A satisfactory little line of bubbles stretched out astern as she gathered way. Uncle George looked round him and was satisfied. Then he spoke again. "Next stop, Cherbourg!" The Greens began to talk. Mary looked around her and saw the solitary figure of Loopy watching from the deck of *Fallen Star* and this time she waved to him.

"Poor Loopy," she said. "That's the last we shall see of him."

But in this she was wrong.

The sort of fine weather which brings people in their thousands down to the seaside resorts, to bathe and to bask in the sunshine, is frequently a source of irritation and anxiety to sailors. Fine weather in the summer, with clear blue skies overhead, and hot windless conditions on land, frequently means mist or fog, or at least extremely hazy conditions, with little or no wind to propel a sailing-boat to its destination.

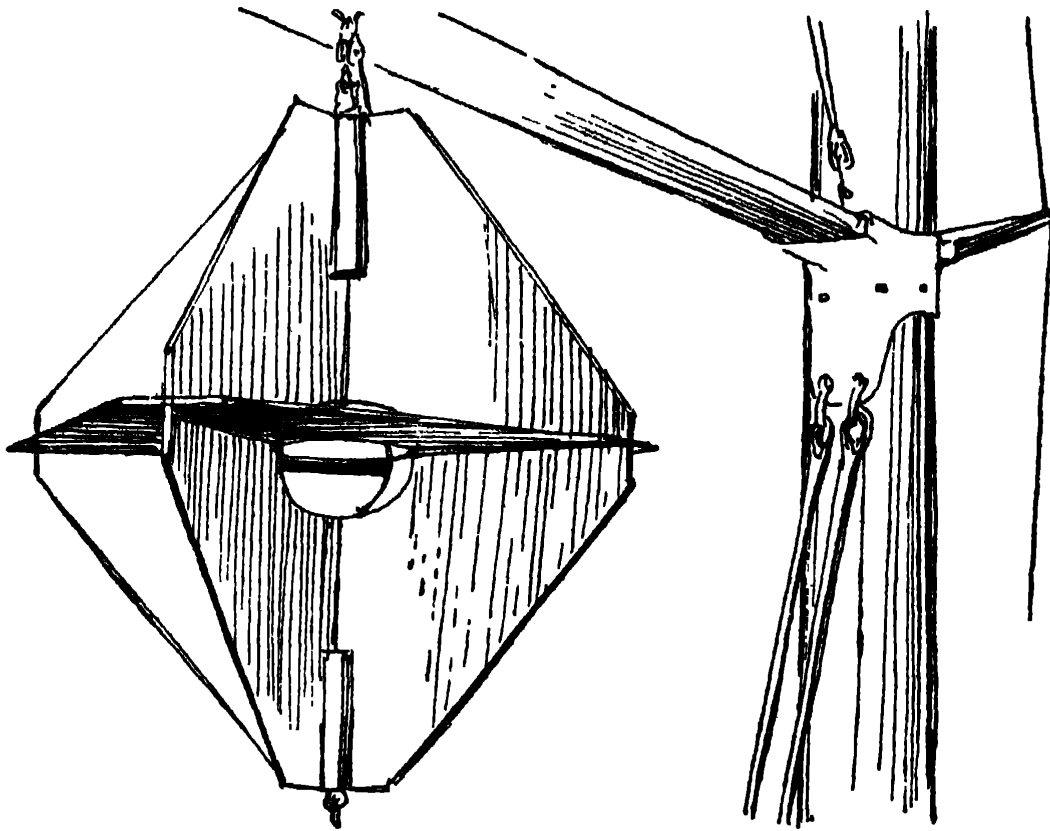
Sailors, according to Uncle George, were very like farmers; the weather seldom suited their purpose. If it was fine there was insufficient wind, and if there was plenty of wind it usually meant a rough passage and a thorough wetting for the crew.

On this particular day the conditions were of the former variety. *Rag Doll* crept along with all her light-weather canvas billowing gently in the faint land breeze, travelling through the Needles Channel, with plenty of current from the strong ebb-tide to get her along, but precious little else.

Consequently, on reaching the open sea and losing a great deal of the force of the tidal stream, she ceased to move through the water and lay rolling gently in a small patch of airless calm, beyond which it was not possible to see. The Isle of Wight was but a few miles to the northward of them; Durlleston Head, Anvil Point and St. Albans Head would have been clearly seen to the west in ordinary conditions of visibility, but today the world was blotted out, except for the thin reedy sound of the fog-signal on the Needles Lighthouse, and the occasional hoots of steamer traffic moving up and down the Channel.

Uncle George was always averse to using his petrol-engine, at sea. To begin with he had a deep-rooted suspicion of all mechanical devices which he was wont to classify as "gadgets." This was largely because, as we have seen before, he didn't know much about machinery, and, like all true sailors, he was suspicious of anything he didn't really understand. But there was a far more valid reason for his reluctance to "get on the engine" in low visibility: *Rag Doll's* petrol-motor was a comparatively silent one, but even it made sufficient noise to drown the sound of approaching traffic. To motor across the busy steamer-lanes in a state of virtual deafness was asking for trouble. It was far safer to lie stopped and to reserve the use of the engine for the purpose of getting out of the way of these great ships which were travelling at high speed and relying on their Radar installations to detect the presence of the numerous small craft which were likely to be found during the summer months in that part of the Channel. Radar, in case you don't already know, is a device which sends out a searching ray; and if the ray bumps into something solid, such as the structure of a ship, it is reflected back to the ship from which it was sent and shows up in a "scanner," rather like a television screen. A trained Radar operator can tell at once how far away the object is, what bearing it is on, and what it is likely to be. A wooden yacht, however, with canvas sails, doesn't reflect the Radar beam at all well, and Uncle George knew this. That was yet

another reason for being very cautious in thick weather. But there is a limit to how cautious one ought to be in everything one does on the high seas. If there was not the inhabitants of these islands would long ago have ceased to exist as an independent nation. After all, as Uncle George was fond of saying, more people die in bed than anywhere else! So, after listening to the weather forecast on the newly acquired radio gadget, and hearing that



Radar Reflector (hanging from *Rag Doll's* crosstrees)

(by courtesy of *Radar Carm Industries*)

there was little likelihood of any perceptible increase of wind, at least until the afternoon, when the sea breezes would begin to blow, Uncle started the petrol-motor, the foresail was lowered, the mainsail was sheeted hard home, and a course was laid for Cherbourg Breakwater. This was very much to the liking of the Green Sailors, who were not prepared to worry too much about what might never happen. They were rather mystified when Uncle George

burrowed in the after-compartment, that capacious locker in the aftermost part of the yacht where everything which "might come in handy" is stowed, produced a sort of diamond-shaped device and hoisted it to the cross-trees. This, said Uncle, was a Radar Reflector, and he only hoped it was all that its designer claimed it to be. With this pessimistic utterance he sat in the cockpit smoking his pipe and watching the little revolving wheel of the patent log clocking up the miles as *Rag Doll's* engine pushed her steadily southward.

The Green Sailors clustered round him in the cockpit and speculated on the possibilities of adventure on this cruise. Binnie, of course, was convinced that some tremendous crook-and-smuggler drama was about to unfold itself; Mark, to whom the taste of French cooking in general and the French way of cooking mussels in particular, appealed greatly, was thinking what he would reply to Uncle when asked to choose his first meal ashore. Mary was busy with pencil and note-book, mapping out the various meals she would have to provide on board, before reaching harbour, and Ben, as usual, was talking to Polly.

Suddenly Uncle George got up and stared into the haze which lay around them. He watched for a while, and then went forward on to the fo'c'sle to get away from the noise of the engine, and stood there balancing easily to the gentle motion of the yacht, and craning his ears.

Presently he returned to the cockpit, saying that he thought he'd heard something, but must have been mistaken. "What did you think it was?" asked Mary. "Might have been a motor-boat," said Uncle; "but whatever it was it's gone now."

"I can see something," said Mark at that moment, pointing over the stern. They all turned their heads. Uncle George jumped to the tiller and watched carefully for the first sign of this "something" which Mark had reported.

"Your eyes are better than mine in this haze," he said; then he added: "but I can see her now. A motor-cruiser,

by the look of her. She's going to pass quite close." For a few moments it looked as if she was going to pass too close for safety, and then, suddenly, she sheared off and came up on *Rag Doll's* port quarter.

"A converted naval motor-launch," said Uncle. "A fine vessel." He levelled his glasses on the newcomer. "I don't fancy the look of her crew," he said; "they don't look like people on holiday to me. Long-haired, unshaven and wearing boots. I'll be bound they're not up to any good."

"Ooh!" said Binnie. "Pirates, do you think?"

"Hardly," said Uncle; "more likely to be smugglers. There's a lot of it about these days."

"I say!" said Mary excitedly. "May I borrow your binoculars, Uncle?"

"Here you are." Uncle passed his glasses to her. "Seen someone you know?"

"Yes," she said presently. "It's him, all right. It's Mr. Paggott! Look, he's waving to us!"

"So he is," said Uncle George. "Paggott? I seem to know that name."

"He's the man who travelled down with us yesterday in the train," explained Mary. "He asked an awful lot of questions—I didn't take to him at all."

"What's the name of his boat?" asked Uncle George; "we can look him up in *Lloyd's Register*, and see who he really is." They scanned the motor-cruiser from stern to stern, but there was no sign of a name.

"Funny that," said Uncle.

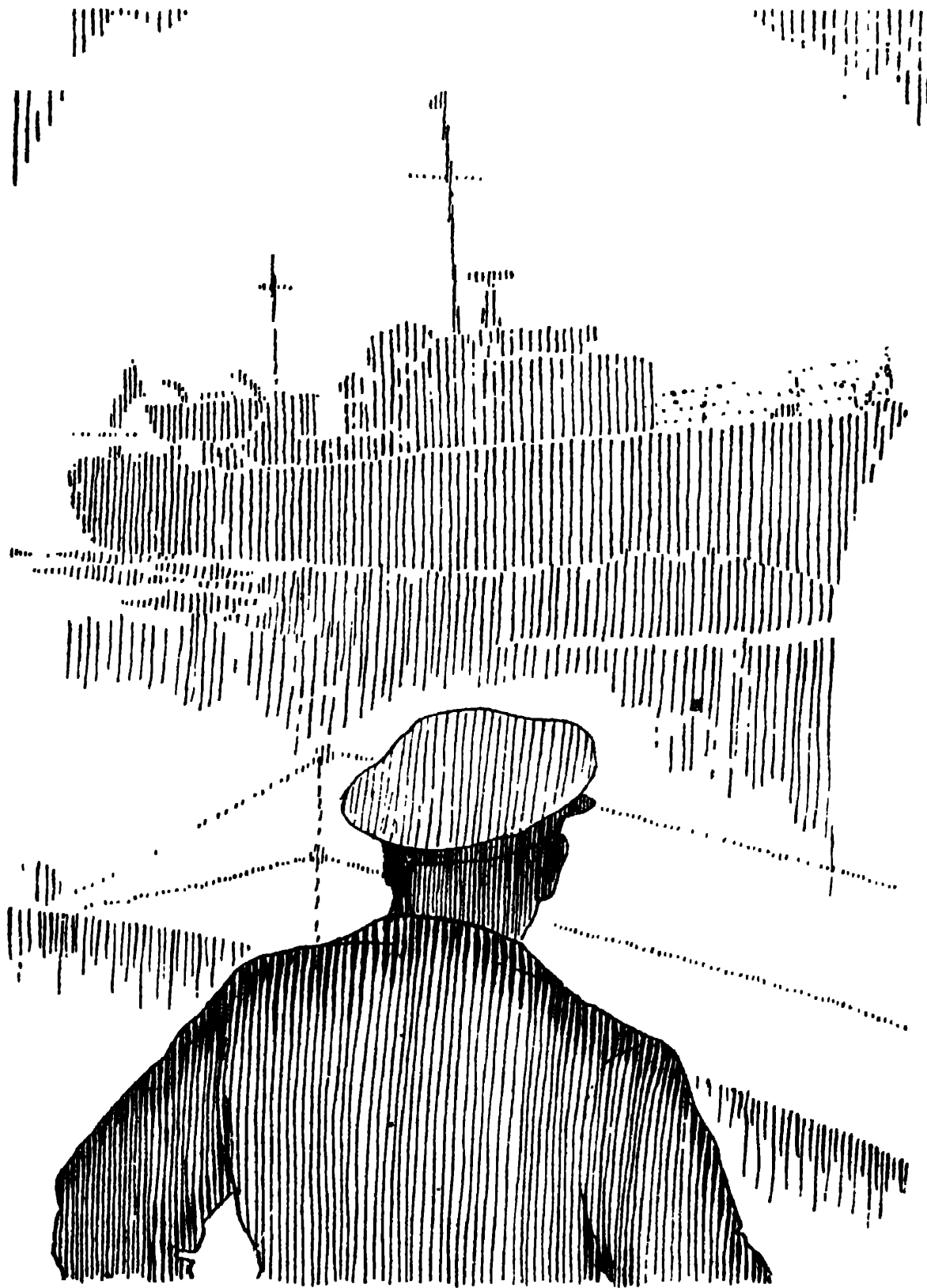
"Look," said Mary, "he's coming really close now." As she was speaking the stranger had slowed down and manœuvred alongside, and the man they knew as Mr. Paggott hailed them.

"Is there anything you want?" he called.

Uncle George waved his hand. "No, thanks," he replied.

"Where are you bound?" asked the inquisitive gentleman.

"Cherbourg," said Uncle testily. Like all Britons he hated being questioned by importunate strangers.



"A converted Naval motor-launch——" said Uncle.

"Then we shall meet there," said Mr. Paggott. "Good-bye for the present, and 'Bong Voyarge.'"

"Thank you," said Uncle George. The nameless vessel speeded up, and dashed away into the murk. Uncle looked puzzled. "Curious thing," he said presently. "That motor-cruiser was fitted with Radar—most unusual in a pleasure boat that size."

"Do you really think she's a smuggler?" asked Binnie, hopefully.

"More than likely," said Uncle.

"How thrilling!" said Binnie.

"It isn't, you know," said Uncle. "It's just rather a sordid sort of way of breaking the law, and it's particularly detestable from a yachting point of view. People like your Mr. Paggott give people like us a bad name. If smuggling goes on we shall have to suffer for their sins."

"How?" asked Mark.

"There will be all sorts of new regulations. We won't be allowed to slip out of Mill Creek and disappear across the Channel as we do now. We shall have to fill in forms and get permission before we go anywhere, and half the charm of cruising in small boats will be lost."

"Wouldn't it be grand if we could catch Mr. Paggott in the act and hand them over to the Preventive Officers!" said Binnie. "I was reading a book about it the other day."

Uncle grinned. "We've absolutely no proof at all beyond the fact that the crew are unshaven and wear boots," he said.

"And she's concealed her name and is fitted with Radar," said Mark.

"And Mr. Paggott's a toad," added Ben. "I wonder why he wanted to know where we were going?" asked Mary.

"Possibly wants us to remember him for some sort of alibi," said Mark.

"Wait a minute," said Uncle; "we've all caught Binnie's complaint. For all we know Mary, your Mr. Paggott, is a blameless gentleman."

"He's not my Mr. Paggott," said Mary indignantly. "I never did like him; nor did Loopy—he told him to push off, and he did."

"Let's change the subject," said Uncle. But Binnie was soon at it again.

"These smugglers," she said, "what do they smuggle?"

"Spirits, scent, wrist-watches, dope and currency, mostly," said Uncle. "Whenever there are high taxes on imports there is a great temptation to risk a spell in gaol and become rich quickly by breaking the law. Two or three trips in a motor-cruiser that size, loaded with dutiable goods, and there's a small fortune to be made."

"It looks easy enough," said Mark; "all he has to do is to load up and rush it across the Channel in the dark."

"Yes," said Uncle, "that's the easy part, but it becomes a bit more complicated *after* the stuff's been landed. You see, if we decided to smuggle, which of course we wouldn't, as we're not fools, we would probably only bring ashore enough for our personal use. I might get a case of brandy, for example, and keep it at home to offer to visitors and have a spot myself and no one would know, but if I tried to *sell* it to anyone then very soon the word would get round, and before long the Customs people would hear of it. After that it would only be a matter of time before I was stopped and searched and properly convicted for my sins."

And there the conversation rested, for at that moment a light breeze began to ruffle the water, and the haze began to disperse. Soon the big Genoa jib was hoisted, the engine was switched off, sheets were eased and *Rag Doll* was pushing away in a calm sea at five knots.

With the cessation of the engine noises Uncle decided to play with his new toy. Presently, out of the loud-speaker of the radio telephone all sorts of sounds came pouring—Scots—French—Portuguese and, best of all, the lovely Cornish voices of the fishing fleet down Channel. It was fascinating to hear this curious babel, at least it was

to start with, and so, contrary to the advice he'd given to his crew, about leaving the wireless on, Uncle did precisely that, and sat smoking and reading, listening with only half an ear to the polyglot chorus.

Suddenly, not only Uncle, but all of them sat up, when they heard the words *Rag Doll* uttered.

"Did you hear——" began Binnie excitedly. Uncle held up a hand for silence and they listened as hard as they could.

A voice said: "She'll do nicely." And in reply: "Are you sure?"

And then finally—"Only a parcel of brats and a half-witted old Commander. Nothing to worry about there."

The voices disappeared behind those of two indignant Frenchmen who had been ordered to stop poaching in prohibited waters. Uncle frantically tuned his receiver to a different frequency and must have done so at the same time as the unknown speakers.

"All right," said the same voice; "if you think it's safe enough, carry on."

"It's safer than us trying it—we got a proper rummaging last trip. They're looking for us."

"That'll do," said the other. "Let me know when you've fixed it and don't talk so much!"

And that was all they could hear.

"He did say *Rag Doll*, didn't he?" asked Mark. Everybody agreed that they'd heard the name quite clearly.

"Of course," said Mary, thoughtfully, "it could be another *Rag Doll*, couldn't it?"

"And another half-witted Commander." Uncle George's voice was full of resentment.

"And another parcel of brats—what cheek!" added Ben.

"It's us all right," said Mary; "and I bet it's got something to do with Mr. Paggott——"

"Who is something more than a toad," said Mark.

"The first time I met him," went on Mary, "I felt that he wasn't a nice man."

"What do you think it's all about?" asked Binnie. Uncle George looked grimmer than they'd ever seen him.

"I think," he said, "that They (whoever 'They' are) are going to get us to do something for them which they don't want to do themselves."

"We won't, will we?" said Binnie, her eyes wide open, with a mixture of fear and delight showing in them.

"No," said Uncle George; "we certainly won't. I'm beginning to think that it's a good thing that I won that radio gadget in that raffle! If anybody tries anything we'll send out a call to the Customs cutter."

"What would they want with *Rag Doll*?" Mary tried to stop her voice from sounding shaky.

"They might try and borrow her," suggested Mark—also rather nervously.

"I think it very unlikely," said Uncle; "but all the same we'd better be watchful."

"If they come aboard us at sea," said Binnie, "that would be piracy, wouldn't it, Uncle?"

"Yes, my dear," said Uncle George.

"Not much good their doing that," said Mark, "unless they got rid of us."

"You don't mean——!" Binnie had a dreadful vision of all of them walking the plank. The glamour of piracy suddenly gave place to a genuine fear of something too real to bear thinking of. She covered her face.

"Shut up! All of you," said Uncle. They'd never heard him speak so roughly. "You're letting your imaginations run away with you. If there is anything in all this it is that Paggott and his friends will try and get us to bring something back to England for them. There would be no point in their using violence of any sort. They may be criminals from the point of view of the Excise Regulations, but don't run away with the idea that they'd cut our throats for the sake of a few thousand pounds. That sort of thing only happens in story-books."

They took comfort from that, but all that day they kept looking round them nervously, half-expecting to see the

sinister motor-cruiser with no name, coming at them with her decks manned with cut-throat pirates, bared to the waist, with curtain-rings in their ears and cutlasses between their teeth, and it was with genuine relief that they heard Uncle give a grunt of satisfaction as he sighted the loom of the land right ahead.

"That'll be Cherbourg," he said; "we shall get in just before dark. Sixteen hours to go seventy miles. Not fast, but I've done it in worse time."

They were all on deck shading their eyes, staring at the dim outline of the land and thinking their own thoughts. Gradually it took shape, and then the rays of the setting sun caught the windows of some of the houses on the high ground above the port, so that they shone like burnished gold, and made the land very inviting. Then, as they rounded the Outer Breakwater Light, and headed up for the inner harbour, the sun went down. At the same moment they found themselves running into a bank of fog which lay in a thick layer on the surface of the harbour, blotting out everything except the sky above, where the first bright star was beginning to twinkle.

"Just in time," said Uncle. "We'll get the sails off, and feel our way in with compass and lead-line. Good job we've been here plenty of times before; I reckon I can smell my way into the Avant Port."

They crept in quietly—the engine just ticking over. Mark was up in the bows, using a lead-line, and intoning the depth very professionally. "By the Mark Five!" he called. Then—after he'd gathered in the lead-line, coiled it in his left hand, taken a few fathoms in his right, and had got the lead swinging nicely from his hand, he hove it again. It flew forward as straight as an arrow from a bow, and dropped with a plop! in the mist-covered water. Away went the line dropping in coils from Mark's left hand, and then, as *Rag Doll* came steadily forward it hung for a moment, vertically beneath her. Mark felt the lead touch bottom, and noticed by the standard marking that there was less than five fathoms and more than three.

So as Uncle George had taught him, he called "Deep Four" and Uncle answered it with a stentorian "Aye! Aye!" There was something comforting, thought Mary, about all this rigmarole of finding out the depth of water. It gave one a sense of safety to hear the words which she'd so often heard before used in that foreign port; for the unknown menace was looming in the background of her thoughts and she welcomed the idea of being moored in the busy little Yacht Basin where there would be lots of company, noise and bustle.

Steadily *Rag Doll* pressed onward, until suddenly, out of the mist, only a few yards away, a high black object towered above them.

"Lock wall right ahead!" called Mary. "The entrance is a point to starboard. Look! there's the side of the lock!"

"O.K.," called Uncle; he reached down and picked up a fog-trumpet, blowing one blast to indicate that *Rag Doll* was entering harbour. As well he did so, for a small boat came suddenly out of the lock and shot past a few feet away.

Now they were passing through the narrow ravine-like lock with its walls towering fifty feet above them on either side. *Rag Doll's* motor took a deeper and ghostlier tone as it echoed in the fog. Slowly they crept in, caught sight of the bows of several yachts and went on until Mark triumphantly sighted a small white mooring buoy. With great expertness he grasped it with a boat-hook, while Mary passed a hemp rope through the ring in the top of the buoy. Meanwhile Uncle George, after taking the way off *Rag Doll*, assisted by Binnie and Ben got the dinghy out and dropped it into the water alongside *Rag Doll*. A long hawser, the end of which was secured on deck, was next passed into the dinghy, and when all was ready Mark got into it and sculled himself towards the dock wall, paying out the hawser over the stern of the little boat. Presently he vanished into the fog. They waited for a while and soon heard his voice calling—"All fast!"

Then they hauled on the hawser and pulled *Rag Doll* back from the buoy to which her bows were secured, stern-on to the dock wall, from the direction of which the sound of voices in a foreign tongue could be heard.

"Golly!" said Mary, suddenly.

"What is it?" asked Uncle.

"I've suddenly realised we're in France!"

"So we are," said Uncle George, "and I'll tell you something else. I'm as hungry as a hunter!"

He cupped his hands to his mouth and shouted: "Hurry up, Mark, we're going to have dinner soon!"

"Coming!" Mark's voice sounded ghostly in the fog. There was a pause and then his voice sounded distressed: "Oh, confound it!" he called; "I didn't secure the dinghy properly and it's drifted out of reach. Shall I swim after it?"

"Wait a minute," called Uncle; "the water in this basin isn't fit to be swum in—try and get someone ashore to lend you a boat."

A voice, which they all recognised, came from the shadowy outline of a vessel moored a short distance parallel to them. "Don't bother," said Mr. Paggott; "I will fetch your dinghy."

Chapter Five

COUNCIL OF WAR

“WELL?” said Uncle George, after their visitor had left them. “What do you think of him?”

Mary spoke first. “I didn’t like Mr. Paggott the very first time I met him and I still don’t like him,” she said.

“That’s definite enough,” said Uncle; “but personal dislikes are one thing and crooks are another. What about you, Binnie; do you think him a master criminal?”

Binnie, whose mouth was full of the most delicious *marron glacé*, which was part of a box of sweets presented by Mr. Paggott, could only say “Glug Glug!” at that stage, but when she had got the glutinous compound into better control she said that he didn’t look like a villain, nor did he speak like one.

“And,” added Ben, dipping further into the unexpected present which was lying on the table and rapidly diminishing in bulk, “he didn’t act like one either. I thought it was jolly Dee the way he rescued the dinghy when Mark had made such a muck of it.”

“That’s quite enough from you, Ben,” said Mark; “the jetty over there is all slippery with oil, half the steps in the ladder are missing and it’s a jolly long way up—the dinghy painter wasn’t long enough, and it slipped out of my hand. I thought it would stay alongside whilst I secured the hawser but——”

“Keep your hair on,” said Ben amiably; “anyway it *was* jolly Dee of old Paggott to bring you back on board and to rescue the dinghy, and”—he swallowed the morsel and took another one—“and everything.”

“What do you think, Uncle?” asked Mary anxiously. It was absurd, she told herself, to worry so much, but the

fact was Mr. Paggott gave her the creeps. Of course, if Uncle George sided with the others she'd feel much better, but so far he had not committed himself.

"There's one thing that I would like to know," he said after a moment's thoughtful silence. "You remember, when he was on board I asked him if he had a ship-to-shore telephone——"

"And he said," added Mary, "'I'm not much of a chap for gadgets,' and you said 'Neither am I.'"

"And," chipped in Mark, "you had covered up our telephone with that sailbag, hadn't you, Uncle?"

"Yes I had," said Uncle George. "If he'd seen ours he might have suspected that we'd overheard a certain conversation. As it is he's told us that he hasn't got a telephone, that he doesn't hold with gadgets, and yet he has a Radar equipment in *Foxibus*, which he tells us is the name of his vessel, though I can't find her in the register. Now, if it turned out that he really did possess a telephone it would look as if he was up to some mischief. Wouldn't it?"

"But that's what we've just done, and we're not crooks," said Binnie. She looked into the box of sweets. "There's one more left for everybody," she said and promptly made sure of her own ration.

"Pig," said Ben and took his.

"Greedy pig," said Mark absent-mindedly and pushed the box over to Mary. "Go on, Mary. You've hardly had any."

Mary shook her head. "I don't like eating sweets given by a man like him," she said seriously.

"Golly! Do you think they're poisoned?" said Binnie.

"I believe I'm beginning to feel queer already!"

"Silence!—greedy child," said Uncle George, "and let us return to the point, which is—is Mr. Paggott up to some sort of mischief in which we're to be involved—or is he rather a benevolent old gentleman who takes a great deal of interest in *Rag Doll* because there's nothing better for him to do and because he's very fond of children?"

"I think," said Mary, "that when grown-ups say they're fond of children they never are."

"Very profound," said Uncle.

"You never say you're fond of children, do you, Uncle?—yet you have us on board," she went on.

"I'm not sure that I regard you as children," said Uncle; "in fact I don't like the expression. You're certainly a great deal younger than I am, but to me you're members of my crew. To call you 'children' is like calling you 'dogs' or 'monkeys.' You'll grow old if you live long enough."

"Uncle never buys boxes of sweets, either," said Binnie, "not like Mr. Paggott did, as if he was trying to suck up to us, but all the same they were jolly good. Are you sure you didn't want yours?" Mary's nod was sufficient permission for her young sister to finish the box.

"Let's try and find out if he has got a telephone," said Mark.

"How?" They all spoke together.

"We'll ask if we can see his ship. Now that we've seen Uncle's set we ought to be able to recognise one if there's one there——"

"And if he hasn't hidden it, like Uncle did," said Mary; "but anyway it's the best idea I can think of. If he really hasn't got a phone we'll know that *Foxibus* had nothing to do with what we heard being said and the whole thing will turn out to be nothing to do with us at all. I do hope so anyway."

"Cheer up!" said Uncle. He got up and went on deck. "It's a fine night," he called, "the fog's lifted—the cafés are all lit up and I can hear music. So if you people have any appetite left after all those sticky sweets I suggest we all go ashore for a blow-out *à la française*."

That put an end to speculation, as perhaps Uncle had intended it should. Half an hour later they were seated in a small restaurant hooting with delight as Uncle spoke his peculiar brand of French, while *Rag Doll*, securely locked and guarded by Polly-the-Parrot, lay snugly at her moorings in the Avant Port.

Chapter Six

ABOARD THE *FOXIBUS* AND LATER

THE next day dawned warm and fine; not that any of the crew of *Rag Doll* were up and about as early as that! They all slept heavily, if a little uneasily, as the result of over-indulgence in the restaurant ashore.

"That's the trouble with French food," said Mark thoughtfully, as he folded up his blankets and stowed them away; "it tastes so jolly good that I always make a pig of myself, and then I have the most awful dreams."

"I know," said Mary; "I heard you having a terrific argument in your sleep with a man called Elkington; you called him a Pi-faced Toad and said he didn't know his job!"

"Golly!" said Mark. "Did I say that?"

"And who," asked Uncle George, "might a man called Elkington be?"

Mark grinned. "He's the 'Stinks' master at School," he said. "I wish I could have heard myself ticking him off. That's the worst of dreams. You never remember the best parts."

"I can remember mine," said Mary. "I dreamed that I heard a man come aboard us and I got out of my bunk—it was so real—and I had a look out of the fore-hatch."

"Come to think of it," said Uncle, "I heard something in the night. Did you see anything or anybody?"

"Nobody near us then," said Mary, "but someone was moving about on the deck of *Foxibus*. I could see a sort of shadow—the lights on the jetty showed him up. It was about two in the morning. Then he got into his boat and started to paddle towards us and I was so fright-

ened I called out and the boat turned round and went back to *Foxibus* and whoever it was got out. I watched for a bit but nothing else happened." Mary looked quite agitated. "Uncle," she said, "I'm scared!"

"What of?" asked Uncle George. "There's no need to be."

"All the same, I am," said Mary; "couldn't we go away from here and give them the slip?"

"All right," said Uncle, after a moment's thought. "Come ashore with me and help me to do some shopping, and then we'll take the tide to Omonville on the edge of the Cherbourg Promontory. It's a nice clean little harbour and the bathing's good. After that we can sail down through the Alderney Race to Guernsey and then back to Mill Creek. How's that?"

"Oh good!" said Mary. "I know it's silly but that Mr. Paggott is getting on my nerves."

"I'll come with you," said Mark; "there's bound to be lots to carry and I want to send a postcard."

"Who to?" asked Binnie.

Mark grinned. "Old Elkington," he said; "he's not such a bad toad really."

So it was arranged and presently Uncle George, Mark and Mary, got into *Rag Doll's* dinghy and went ashore, while Binnie and Ben were left on board.

They had intended to get everything ready for sea, so that when Uncle returned he would exclaim with surprised delight at the cleverness of the two youngest members of the crew; but somehow, although their intentions were good the work remained undone. There were other and more interesting occupations than cleaning ship. Polly, for instance, was always at her best after breakfast. She liked to have a bit of a natter with Ben who tried to teach her very long words like Popacatapetal and Salicylic Acid, and so, on this morning, Ben was glad to take advantage of the absence of three of the crew to get on with Polly's education. Binnie, on the other hand, suddenly remembered that in her suit-case, packed by her loving Mama,

was a brand-new Biggles, and that was the end of her good intentions. She lay full length on her tummy on the starboard settee and devoured the book like a scavenging seagull, completely oblivious of the sound of Ben's tuition, which soon died away, or of anything else. It was not, therefore, until a shadow splashed across the pages of her open book that she was aware that someone had come aboard and was crouched in the cockpit. Raising herself lazily on one elbow she turned her head in order to see who it was and said, "Hullo—you're back soon," for she thought it was Uncle George. The figure in the cockpit stiffened as if surprised to hear a voice and then slowly stood up.

"Hi!" shouted Binnie, getting off the settee and Ben turned round also. "Who are you?" asked Binnie—the presence of the sinister stranger corresponded so exactly with the situation of which she was reading in her book that she couldn't make up her mind for a moment which world she was in, the real or the imaginary. Then the figure in the cockpit turned and she saw it was Mr. Paggott.

"My dear young lady," he said, "I'm afraid I startled you as much as you startled me. You see I was told that you were all ashore."

"What do you want?" asked Ben. He walked towards the visitor. Binnie roused herself and followed. Now that she was truly awake she was determined if possible to prevent Mr. Paggott from seeing the radio set. So she pushed past her brother, put on a smile that was far from showing how she really felt and listened politely to Mr. Paggott's explanations.

It was his gold pencil, he said. He remembered using it when he had come aboard the previous night. When he got back to *Foxibus* he missed it. He thought, perhaps, that he'd either left it in the saloon or dropped it in the cockpit. Could he have a look round? This was very awkward. He'd be bound to see the radio set if he did. Binnie thought fast and then, crossing her fingers, because she was about to tell a thumping lie, she said that she

was pretty certain that Uncle George had picked it up and put it in his pocket.

"It's no good looking round," she went on, "because Ben and I have just cleaned the whole ship." This was news to Ben but he didn't contradict his sister. Mr. Paggott scratched his chin for a while and then evidently made up his mind. "You haven't seen *Foxibus* yet, have you?" he said; "now, I'll tell you what we'll do—we'll go on board now and when the rest of your party returns from shore we'll give them a surprise. I'll call them alongside and we'll have cakes and ginger pop. How's that?"

Binnie thought for a while. "I think," she said at last, "that Uncle won't mind, as long as I lock up *Rag Doll*. Uncle's very particular about locking things up," she went on innocently.

"Éclairs," said Mr. Paggott, absently; "and I think there are some meringues. Do you like meringues, little man?"

"Don't mind," said Ben sturdily.

"Well, let's go then," said Mr. Paggott, "before the others come back." He got into his own dinghy and Ben followed, while Binnie locked the cabin door and hid the key under the compass, taking great care that she wasn't observed. Then she hopped nimbly into the dinghy and was ferried across the few yards of water which separated *Foxibus* from *Rag Doll*.

An unkempt member of the motor-launch's crew was on deck. He took the dinghy painter without a word, while Mr. Paggott talked incessantly. "Our young friends are anxious to be shown round and I've promised to do so," he said. "While I'm down below with them perhaps you'll attend to your *other duties*, Perkins!"

The man whom he addressed as Perkins nodded his head as if he didn't care enough about anything to speak.

"Splendid!" said Mr. Paggott and handed a small parcel to him. "Look after this for me, will you, my dear fellow. I'm so afraid of mislaying it." Perkins took the object and thrust it into his pocket.

"Good, good!" said Mr. Paggott, "and the sooner we get on with our little tasks the better; and keep an eye open for the rest of *Rag Doll's* crew—they'll be back soon. Be careful not to *miss* them." Again Perkins nodded.

"And now let's visit the engine-room," said Mr. Paggott.

There wasn't much to see in the engine-room and it stank vilely of Diesel oil but Mr. Paggott seemed to think that they'd be awfully interested in it. He talked about epicyclic gearing—four-stroke cycles—piston-slap and torsional vibration. Then he started both engines up so that they roared, and he couldn't be heard any longer. Then he pointed to all the pressure gauges and went on talking—at least they supposed he was talking for his lips kept moving. Binnie tried to tell him that she couldn't hear a thing but it was no good with all that din going on. So suddenly she ran to the ladder and climbed up it through the open hatch and on deck. Mr. Paggott scrambled after her leaving the engines running, and Ben followed Mr. Paggott.

"Much too noisy!" said Binnie.

"And smelly!" added her brother.

"Is that all!" said Mr. Paggott. "Well, I'll tell you what we'll do—we'll go down to the saloon and have a little refreshment, what?"

"I'd rather visit the wheel-house," said Binnie. She reckoned that if *Foxibus* had a radio set that would be the most likely place to see it. Mr. Paggott shook his head. "Not now if you don't mind—we're having a clean-up there. Now I'm sure you're ready for something to eat and drink."

The man Perkins was nowhere to be seen and *Foxibus's* dinghy was no longer alongside. Binnie's gaze wandered over to *Rag Doll* for a moment. There she was, trim and beautiful, and completely deserted.

"Come along, young lady," said Mr. Paggott; "I've lots of very interesting things to show you." He shepherded them down a large central hatch towards the saloon which

lay at the end of a short corridor. On either side of the corridor were small cabins. Binnie looked in at one and thought she saw what she had been hoping to see, but there was no time to make sure. "Come along," said Mr. Paggott and urged them into the saloon.

It was roomy and comfortable. Mr. Paggott fumbled in the drawer of a sideboard and produced some tattered yachting papers. "Have a look at these," he said, "while I go in search of the good things of life. Ginger pop, I think it was you said."

Besides being tattered the papers were far from being modern.

"I saw these years ago," said Ben. He wandered round the room. "She's not a patch on *Rag Doll*, even if she is bigger. Is she, Binnie?"

"He's up to something!" whispered Binnie.

"Who is?" asked Ben.

"Old Paggott," said Binnie. Suddenly she made up her mind.

"I don't like this," she said; "let's go on deck—I don't like it down here."

"What about the food?" asked the practical Ben. "I'm hungry and it sounds smashing."

"We'll eat it up top," said Binnie. "Come on."

She went to the sliding door which Mr. Paggott had shut behind him and pulled at the handle.

"It won't open," she said.

"Let me have a try," said Ben; "it slides—it doesn't open like an ordinary door. I saw Mr. Paggott work it." He caught hold of it and tugged as hard as he could, but nothing happened.

"It's locked," said Binnie. "He's locked us in!" She pulled violently at the panels. "Let me out! Let me out!" she cried. Nobody answered—in the next compartment the Diesel engines still thundered. Binnie suddenly had the terrifying thought that *Foxibus* was going to sea. They were being kidnapped!

She ran to the settee which lay along the port side of

the saloon and climbed on to it. There was an open scuttle there. It was not large enough to escape through, but at least she would be able to see what was happening. Ben climbed up alongside her. "What are you so excited about?" he asked.

"I don't like this." She was nearly in tears. "He's locked us in!"

The thud of the Diesels suddenly died and half the sense of fear died with them. Perhaps the door wasn't locked after all. Perhaps she had imagined it all—after all she'd been reading a pretty exciting book before all this had happened. With a sudden resolution she marched to the door—seized the handle and pulled. It slid open and she found herself looking at Mr. Paggott, smiling paternally and carrying a large tray of cakes and bottles.

"Here I am at last!" he said gaily, "and I've just seen the rest of your party coming down the jetty."

He put the tray on the table and looked at Binnie's tear-stained face. "Is there anything the matter?" he asked.

"You locked us in!" said Binnie.

"Oh dear!" Mr. Paggott was genuinely disturbed. "It's a terrible door—it sometimes jams."

"You locked us in," repeated Binnie.

"There isn't a key," said Mr. Paggott; "why should I want to lock you in?"

"I say," said Ben, "those really are meringues, aren't they?"

"Go ahead and perhaps your little sister will follow suit," said Mr. Paggott.

Binnie eyed the food for a moment and then took a cake. "I'm not his little sister," she said with her mouth full.

A few minutes later the rest of the party arrived and they all had remarkably fine elevenses. Mr. Paggott was the soul of hospitality, pressing everyone to eat more, while a loud popping sound betrayed the presence of champagne for the elders. As she ate and drank and chattered Binnie

felt that her fears had been groundless. She was, she told herself, an imaginative chump—always looking for spies and crooks. She must cure herself of it. All the same it was jolly fishy—the pretence of looking for a lost pencil and everything. She'd tell Uncle all about it, she decided, and then something happened to make her change her mind. Uncle had finished his cake and felt in his pocket for his smoking utensils.

"Hullo!" he said, as he drew out an unusual object from his side pocket, "a gold pencil—now who is the owner of this pretty thing?"

Mr. Paggott was overwhelmed with delight.

"So you did find it!" he said. "I'm so relieved. That pencil has a history. I was afraid I'd lost it. I was telling the little lady about it. Wasn't I, Binnie?"

"Yes," said Binnie, "you were."

Uncle George handed it over. "I must be getting absent-minded," he said. "I don't remember picking it up. Glad I found it before we parted company. Come on!—you voracious Greens—time to go to sea."

"Ah," said Mr. Paggott, "and where are you bound this time?"

They were all very surprised to hear Uncle George say "Barfleur"—for two reasons: one was that he had often told them that it wasn't a suitable place for a boat like *Rag Doll* to lie, and the other was that it was diametrically opposite in direction to Omonville. Moreover, the tidal stream would be wrong if they sailed for Barfleur now.

Yet Uncle George repeated Barfleur—praised its anchorage and admired its quaintness. Binnie's misgivings came back, so much so that when they had returned to *Rag Doll*, hoisted the dinghy inboard, slipped their moorings, motored out of the harbour and, hoisting the sails, had set course for Omonville, she confided to Uncle George the whole story of what had happened to Ben and her aboard *Foxibus*.

Uncle George listened and showed in various ways that he was not pleased. When her story was ended he puffed

at his pipe in silence and the Greens sat round him in the cockpit and waited for his judgment.

"I don't like this at all," he said at last. "I blame myself entirely. Between us we've constructed a cock-and-bull theory of crooks and smugglers and it's so much upset our peace of mind that when Binnie can't open a door for a minute she starts to imagine that she is being kidnapped. There seems to be no justification at all for the state of mind we've got ourselves into. It's high time we put a stop to it."

"But Uncle," said Mary, "why did you tell Mr. Paggott we were going to Barfleur?"

"That's just what I mean," said Uncle. "I'm not in the habit of telling lies, even in a good cause; but I told him that one because I didn't want to have anything more to do with him, and I want to put an end to these jitters that we're suffering from. I'll tell you what we'll do. When we get into harbour we'll search this ship from truck to keelson!"

"Then you do think that there's something fishy going on?" said Mark.

"No," said Uncle, "I don't. But here is a practical way of settling the point. Now, if there is anything in the theory that Paggott is up to mischief and deliberately got Binnie and Ben away from *Rag Doll*, then he would have seized the opportunity to plant something aboard her when she was empty."

"What a pity Polly couldn't tell us," said Ben. "Do you think if I asked her——"

"Pipe down, Ben," said Uncle; "there's a good chap. Now, when we have searched and found nothing—I want you all to put the whole thing out of your minds. This is a holiday and we don't want to spoil it by stupidly imagining all sorts of things. Is that agreed?"

"Rather," said Mary.

"But," said Binnie, "supposing we do find something?"

"Then," said Uncle, "we'll have to think again." And there it rested for the time being.

Omonville is eight miles from Cherbourg. It is a little fishing hamlet with a tiny natural harbour and it affords quite a good shelter for small vessels if the wind is blowing from a westerly direction. If, however, the wind turns to the east there is little or no protection, and a vessel at anchor would find herself on a lee shore with rocks nearly all around her. Because of its position at the left-hand tip of the Cherbourg Promontory it is a very useful spot for a sailing-boat to lie whilst waiting for a favourable tide to take her through the dreaded Alderney Race, where the strength of the tidal stream reaches seven knots, so that it is absolutely necessary to have it with you if you want to go to Guernsey. On this golden summer's day only a light breeze ruffled the surface of the sea. *Rag Doll*, with her light weather Genoa jib, sailed along the coast, making barely perceptible headway through the water, but because of the tidal stream moving towards her destination at a speed which soon brought her there.

As soon as the anchor was on the bottom and sufficient chain was veered to give *Rag Doll* a secure mooring, it was "Hands to Bathe!" and how glad they were to be able to swim in the beautiful clear water, especially after lying in the Avant Port with its scum-flecked surface and smelly refuse.

After the swim—a real *Rag Doll* tea, with French bread, cherry jam, Normandy butter and beautiful little peaches. Then, after a short pause for contemplation while the meal digested itself, the crew turned to and searched the ship from end to end.

Everything was taken out of every compartment and locker, examined by Uncle George, and returned to its stowage. He even shone his torch into the after compartment and had the floor-boards of the saloon taken up so that he could really inspect the bilges. The sails were emptied out of their bags and the fenders were inspected to see if anything had been stitched up in them. It took a long time and the sun was setting when Uncle George pronounced himself as being satisfied.

"Now," he said, "that settles it. From now on the episode of *Foxibus* is closed. You've seen for yourselves that there is nothing aboard. We've given Paggott the slip (if he really did want to follow us he'll be looking in Barfleur) and there is nothing more to be said. So, please Binnie, don't ever talk about it again."

"It wasn't my fault," began Binnie.

"I know," said Uncle George, "it was mine and"—he looked angrily at the radio set—"that thing. I never did hold with new-fangled contraptions—they spoil the peaceful harmony of life afloat. I've half a mind to ditch it."

But the other half of his mind prevailed—which was just as well when one thinks what happened later on.

Chapter Seven

A VOYAGE TO GUERNSEY, AND—

WITH their minds at rest and greatly refreshed by a long quiet night in the little haven of Omonville, the Green Sailors set out for the trip to Guernsey, through the Alderney Race, with pleasurable anticipation which was tinged with slight feelings of foreboding. To all yachtsmen the Race, like its counterparts on the English coast, is something to be treated with the greatest respect, for the tidal streams are fierce-running, there are a number of dangerous rocks and heavy overfalls persist where there are shoals. An overfall, by the way, is what its name implies; the swiftly moving water is obstructed by the presence of a bank, or shoal, and this causes the sort of ripple that you see in a small river or stream. But in the case of a Tide Race it is a great deal more than a harmless ripple, especially if the wind is blowing in the opposite direction to that of the tidal stream.

The Greens had on several occasions sailed through the St. Albans Race and knew only too well how broken water and confused seas can ill-treat a small vessel, and they had no desire to be caught in similar conditions in a place from which there can be no escape once the journey is begun, for *Rag Doll's* top speed was only just as great as the speed of the tidal stream in the Alderney Race. But on this day it was difficult to imagine anything but a very smooth passage; the sky was a cloudless blue—a pleasant haze hung over the land and the weather forecast which they had listened to from their much-despised radio set, was wholly favourable with a promise of “further outlook—similar.”

Nevertheless Uncle George insisted on the most rigorous

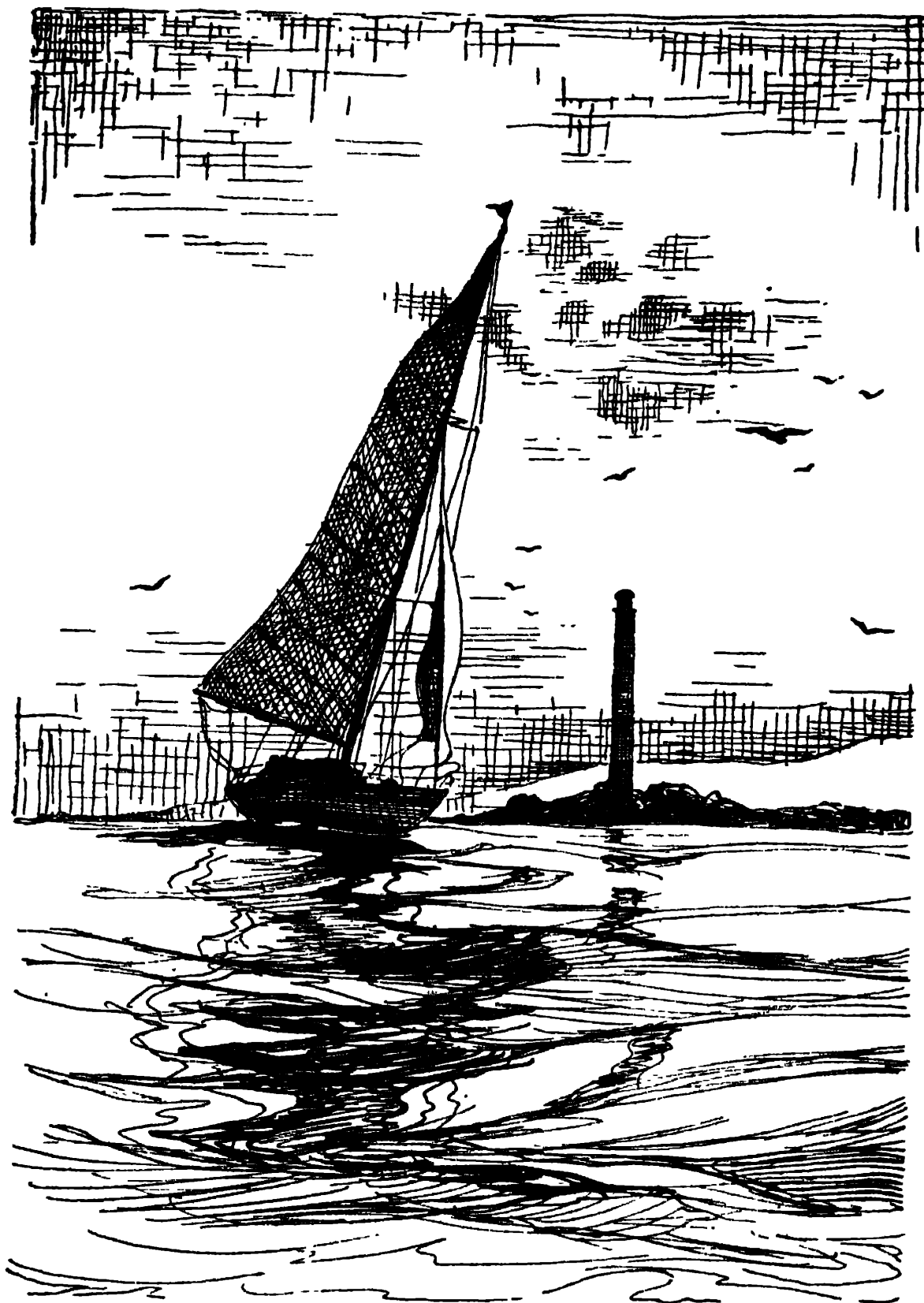
precautions before casting his ship into the tide. The dinghy was firmly lashed on top of the coach roof, and all ventilators were screwed down. The cable-pipe, through which the anchor chain passed, would be carefully stopped up with plasticine after the anchor had been weighed. Canvas covers were lashed over the fore-hatch and the skylight and extra lashings were got ready for the anchor itself. "You see," said Uncle, "it only needs a capful of wind to kick up an ugly sea in the matter of a few minutes. As long as we're battened down there is no danger, though I must admit that on such a lovely day as this it looks an unnecessary precaution."

When all was ready the Greens pulled the anchor up by hand and secured it, while Uncle George piloted *Rag Doll* through the Channel into more open water where the sails were hoisted. There was a light following wind when course was set to pass two miles off Cap de la Hague at the extreme western end of the Cherbourg Promontory. Away to starboard was the faint purple outline of the Island of Alderney. It really was a lovely day.

As they drew nearer to the tall lighthouse on the end of the land they began to feel the effect of the sluicing tide. Light though the wind was, the sea was boiling in great swirling patches as the pent-up waters fought to pass round that corner. Uncle George at the tiller was hard put to it to keep *Rag Doll* on a steady course. She bucked and lurched as the eddies twisted her this way and that, little waves jumped up to meet her, spattering her gleaming white decks with goutts of water. It was as if the Race was saying: "If I really wanted to I could swamp you in no time at all. So watch your step!" And they watched it.

It was an exhilarating feeling to be moving over the earth's surface at something in the region of eight knots of which the Race itself was contributing more than half.

Soon the lighthouse showed astern as a thin pencil shrouded the summer haze; Alderney grew out of the sea and stretched like a sleeping animal all along the northern



She bucked and lurched as the waves twisted her this way
and that.

horizon. Away ahead the islands of Sark and Guernsey, with their myriads of satellite rocks, showed faintly at first. And all the time, like some gigantic moving carpet, the tidal stream brought them nearer to their destination.

As they passed down the Great Russel Channel and turned to make a course for the entrance to St. Peter Port harbour Uncle expressed his satisfaction.

"I'm not one of those fellows who laughs a merry ha-ha! and goes looking for trouble," he said. "The passage of the Alderney Race can be one of the most dangerous sea-ways in the northern hemisphere and I'm always glad when it is over. I wouldn't go near it if it wasn't for the fact that it's a short cut. Don't forget, Mark, that when you start taking your own boat around, as undoubtedly you will, you must treat this part of the world with the greatest respect."

Mark suddenly had visions of himself as the skipper of a boat just like *Rag Doll*. What a wonderful thought!—though it might be a bit worrying at times. He grinned politely at his uncle and promised to remember.

After *Rag Doll* had been brought to anchor in a suitable part of the harbour, had been visited by the local Customs officer and given a clean bill of health, her crew were free to go ashore if they wished to. Uncle George, who had friends there, went off alone and left the Greens to their own devices. On a previous occasion* when they had visited St. Peter Port they had rushed ashore to see the island but this time they preferred to sit on deck and watch the pageant of movement in the harbour itself.

The great railway steamers came and went with effortless ease. French fishing-boats, attracted by the cheapness of the local cigarettes, chugged into the inner harbour to spend a night there before continuing their arduous existence in the rock-strewn waters of the Brittany coast. There were several other visiting yachts, and, of course, a great number of local craft. From where they lay at anchor they could see through the entrance to the harbour a wonderful

* *The Green Sailors.*

view of jumbled rocks and land which rose from the horizon as the tide ebbed and then slowly sank back into it as the flooding waters returned.

"This is heavenly," said Mary; "places always look much nicer from the sea than when you actually land and there's much more to watch. Look!" she said pointing to the harbour entrance—"there's a great big motor-cruiser coming in." As she spoke some of the brightness seemed to go out of the golden evening and before Mark, who had levelled his binoculars at the newcomer, had spoken, Mary knew who it was.

Foxibus anchored only a few yards away and as soon as her anchor chain had rattled in the hawse-pipe and her powerful Diesels had ceased to pulsate, sure enough the voice of Mr. Paggott came readily across the water.

"So you didn't go to Barfleur?" he said.

"No," said Mark; "did you?"

"Just looked in," said Mr. Paggott. "We went on to St. Vaast for the night. Jolly place, what?"

"We went there last year," said Mark; "the wind was wrong for Barfleur so Uncle came this way."

"Where are you going to next?" asked Mr. Paggott.

"Why do you want to know?" said Mark.

Mr. Paggott gave a high-pitched cackle. "My dear young gentleman, that's not a very polite way of answering a civil question. I assure you that I couldn't care less where you go to next, if that's your attitude."

Mark felt that perhaps he had spoken a little too freely, and he too, tried to cover it up.

"What I meant was that we don't know. Uncle George is ashore and won't be back till after supper. If you like I'll ask him to talk to you."

"Thank you," said Mr. Paggott and went below. Presently two of the ugliest and worse-dressed of his crew got *Foxibus's* dinghy over the side and Mr. Paggott reappeared clad in his best clothes.

"Does anybody want a trip ashore?" he asked. They declined politely.

When Uncle George returned in a longshoreman's boat, he was told about Mr. Paggott's questions.

"What did you tell him?" he said in a casual sort of voice.

"I told him that we didn't know," said Mark.

"Nor do we," added Mary. "Where are we going, Uncle?"

"Mill Creek," said Uncle, "and we'll start bright and early tomorrow morning."

Chapter Eight

HER MAJESTY'S CUSTOMS

“UNCLE! Uncle!” The squeak in Ben’s voice was too much for Polly, who joined in until the saloon echoed and re-echoed with “Uncles!”

“What is it?” Uncle George’s voice cut through the cackle like a steamer’s fog-horn.

“There’s a great big motor-cruiser coming up the river,” shouted Ben.

Uncle George’s face, covered with a mask of shaving-soap, emerged from the little lavatory compartment where he had been preparing himself for his visit to London. “Is it *Foxibus*?” he inquired.

Mary joined in. “Oh no!” she said. “It’s painted blue and there are uniformed people on board her.”

“Ah!” said Uncle George. “That’s one of the Customs Cutters.” He vanished and they heard him humming a little tune as he completed his toilet.

It was just on twenty-four hours since *Rag Doll* had sailed from St. Peter Port; a slow passage, but one that they all enjoyed, completely uneventful, on calm seas, and a nice beam wind to keep *Rag Doll* moving steadily towards her destination. Now, after a satisfactory breakfast the Greens were getting that funny now-it’s-all-over-but-I-wish-it-wasn’t feeling which follows closely on that first lifting of the tension that all sailors experience when harbour is reached.

Rag Doll was lying on her mooring; a yellow flag was flying at her starboard cross-trees to indicate that she had returned from abroad and required both “Pratique” and Customs Clearance. As long as the yellow flag was flying she was in quarantine and nobody must visit her;

likewise no member of the crew was allowed to land until it was hauled down by the order of the visiting Port Officials who would grant her crew the necessary licence to go about their own affairs.

Mill Creek's Port Officials were far from officious. The Harbour-Master had passed them already and had contented himself with a cheerful greeting. Sam Smart, the local Customs officer, would turn up sooner or later and would sign all the necessary papers without making any fuss. So Uncle George prepared himself for London, confident that Sam's motor-boat would soon be alongside to take him ashore.

He was therefore very surprised when the Revenue Cutter stopped abreast *Rag Doll*, picked up a vacant mooring and lowered a small boat which rowed rapidly alongside her.

"Good morning," said the older man of the two visitors. "Where are you from?"

"St. Peter Port," said Mark.

"May we come aboard?" went on the officer, as he hauled himself up with great agility. Mark wondered what would happen if he said "No," for it was pretty obvious that the two men were coming willy-nilly.

"Won't you come below?" said Mary, and again the invitation was unnecessary. Down they clattered into the saloon, filling it with the bulk of their bodies. A great leather satchel was slapped on the table, and sundry papers were removed from it. The four Greens clustered round, noticing the behaviour of the two men with wide-eyed interest.

"If you'll forgive my saying so," said Customs Number One, who introduced himself as Mr. Furbelow, "you don't look a very ancient crew to be crossing this yere Channel—do they, Harold?"

"That's a fact they don't," said Harold.

"Who's the Skipper of you four?" asked Mr. Furbelow, his keen eyes darting round suspiciously.

Mark shook his head. "None of us is," he said.

"Come, come, sir," said Mr. Furbelow, "there must be

a Skipper. You can't run a ship like it was the Soviet Union, can they, Harold?"

"That's a fact they can't," said Harold.

"Well now, who's the oldest of you?" said Mr. Furbelow.

"I am," said Mark.

"Ah!" said Mr. Furbelow. "Now we're getting somewhere, aren't we, Harold?"

"That's a fact we are," said Harold.

"Good," said Mr. Furbelow; "then we'll get this yere young gentleman to sign the forms." He began to spread the papers out.

"But oughtn't the real Skipper to sign them?" asked Mark. Mr. Furbelow's face was a picture.

"You mean there's someone else been with you?" asked Mr. Furbelow.

"Rather!" said Ben. "We wouldn't trust ourselves with Mark as Skipper, would we, Binnie?"

"We did once," said Binnie, "so don't be so flopshus."

"I'm not flopshus," said Ben.

"You are," said Binnie.

"I'm not," said Ben.

Mr. Furbelow held up a shapely hand. "If you please, ladies and gentlemen." There was a brief silence.

"Worse than the parrot house at the Zoo," said Mr. Furbelow; "isn't it, Harold?"

"That's a fact it is," said Harold.

"This other person who is the Skipper," said Mr. Furbelow, "'e shouldn't ought to have gone ashore. That's contrary to the regulations, that is."

"He isn't ashore," said Mary. At that moment Uncle George emerged from the toilet and made himself known. Mr. Furbelow substituted reproach for suspicion in the glance that he threw round the assembly.

"Young people will have their joke," he said heavily.

"They are a proper wagon-load of monkeys," said Uncle, seating himself alongside Mr. Furbelow. "Now to what do I owe this unexpected pleasure! I was expecting Sam Smart."

"We saw you come in from sea and followed you here," said Mr. Furbelow. "Just a matter of routine, sir."

"Then I'd be much obliged if you would make it snappy," said Uncle George; "I have a train to catch."

"The quicker the sooner," said Mr. Furbelow. To do him justice he was quick. Signatures were collected, Pratique was signed, the yellow flag was hauled down. A glass of wine was offered and refused; in fact all the formalities of a Customs visit were faithfully observed.

Then, just as Mr. Furbelow was about to depart he asked casually: "When you was over in Cherbourg did you happen to see a large motor-cruiser by the name of—wait a minute, I got it here——" He looked at his note-book: "Primrose?" he finished.

"Definitely no," said Uncle.

"Or Pushkin?" asked Mr. Furbelow.

"No again."

"Or Swizzlestick?"

"No."

"Very disheartening." Mr. Furbelow looked as if he was going to cry.

"Are you looking for a fleet?" asked Uncle George.

"No," said Mr. Furbelow, "one boat, with several names. He must have chosen another one."

"*Foxibus*," said Binnie.

"Ah," said Mr. Furbelow, consulting his note-book again. "So you have. Now that's very interesting. Proper significant that is, isn't it, Harold?"

"That's a fact it is," said Harold.

Uncle George sighed. He could see that his luncheon engagement was already in jeopardy. There would be a lot of questions now.

When Uncle George had finished the long story of Mr. Paggott and all his doings with *Rag Doll's* crew, Mr. Furbelow sat in silence for some time. By now Uncle George had missed his train so he put through a call on his ship-to-shore telephone and informed the man whom he should have met



“Ah!” said Mr. Furbelow. “Proper significant that is, isn’t it, Harold?”

that he wouldn't be there. When he had finished Mr. Furbelow was still in silent cogitation. He sat on the star-board settee with his assistant alongside him while the four Greens began to fidget. Mr. Furbelow was thinking, and when he thought he did so with great concentration. Uncle George filled his pipe and poured himself out a glass of French wine. As he raised it to his lips he caught the eye of his crew and winked. There was a sudden explosion of laughter which had the effect of rousing Mr. Furbelow from his trance-like attitude.

"No laughing matter," he said solemnly. "Rightly or wrongly you've got yourself mixed up in a nefarious matter, sir. Now let me think."

He went back into his mental huddle while the four Greens crept silently away to the upper deck where they could be heard giggling happily. The three men continued to sit in the saloon. Eventually Uncle George's stock of patience became exhausted.

"Who is this fellow Paggott?" he asked.

"Who isn't he?" replied Mr. Furbelow.

"Well, he is no friend of ours to start with, and he isn't the Shah of Persia, nor is he King Farouk, nor Father Neptune"—Uncle George decided to go on talking until he roused some sort of response from this tiresome pudding of a man—"and he isn't Len Hutton or Stanley Matthews either——" His recital was interrupted by a loud guffaw from Harold, which had the effect of bringing the Greens back into the saloon.

"What's the joke?" asked Binnie. Uncle George eyed her gloomily.

"I doubt very much if there is one," he said, and then, turning to Mr. Furbelow he said: "I've told you who Mr. Paggott isn't—what about telling me who he is!"

"Ah," said Mr. Furbelow, "he's a slippery customer all right, isn't he, Harold?"

"That's a fact he is," said Harold wiping his eyes, for he was still shaking with laughter.

"No laughing matter," said Mr. Furbelow automatically.

"This is where we went out," said Mary wickedly. Harold went off again like a Gatling gun.

"If we only had some tea-things," said Uncle, "we could invite the March Hare and his friends along."

"We've got the Dormouse already," whispered Binnie, looking at the senior Customs officer.

"I know what you're thinking," said Mr. Furbelow; "but please don't rush me. I want to save you from any consequences which might arise from your—*contre-temps avec Monsieur Paggott*—if you will pardon my French. Now, I look at it this way——"

"Yes?" said Uncle encouragingly.

"Rightly or wrongly," said Mr. Furbelow, "he hid something aboard this yere packet and it's we who've got to find it."

"But we've already searched her from stem to stern," said Uncle.

"Ah," said Mr. Furbelow; "there's searching and searching, isn't there, Harold?"

"That's a fact there is," said Harold.

"Me and Harold will find it—if it's there," went on Mr. Furbelow, rising majestically, and removing his coat. "Now, if you'll all be good enough to go on deck we'll get on with the business. It's some time since I did a proper rummage of a yacht, I'm in need of practice."

A long time later Mr. Furbelow put his perspiring face through the after-hatch and announced that he had completed the search and had found nothing.

"I didn't expect you would," said Uncle George; "but now you've put my mind at rest. I suppose that old Paggott is just a tiresome busybody, and that's how I shall regard him in future."

"He's more than that," said Mr. Furbelow, climbing laboriously up on deck, followed by the faithful Harold.

"Tell you what, sir. If at any time you happen to come across *Foxibus* or Mr. Paggott again—suppose you give us a tinkle on your blower and just say so. Only don't mention no names; that there instrument is not

without its imperfections, one of which is that everybody can listen to your conversation. So if you want to talk to us don't call *Vendetta*—that's the name of our ship. Give us a code name."

"Such as?" asked Uncle George.

"Let me think," said Mr. Furbelow.

"No, don't do that," said Uncle George hastily. "How about 'Stormcock' eh?"

"A very happy thought," said Mr. Furbelow.

"That's a fact it is," said Harold.

They parted the best of friends, and Uncle George said, when they were well out of earshot, that it had been well worth missing a luncheon engagement to have met such charming personalities. Then he got into the dinghy and was rowed by Mark and Mary to the jetty, while Binnie and Ben amused themselves by putting on a lifelike imitation of Mr. Furbelow and Harold.

Chapter Nine

THE SECRET SOCIETY

AS Mark and Mary paddled the dinghy slowly back to *Rag Doll*, after putting Uncle George ashore at the jetty, they heard a familiar voice and remembered Loopy Lomas for the first time since they had sailed to France five days before.

"Well!" said Loopy. "Look who's here!" He was leaning over the gunwale of *Fallen Star* and was clearly very pleased to see them. There's nothing so pleasant as sitting in a dinghy, with all the time in the world and chatting to an old friend, especially one whom you are very glad to see. There were lots of things they wanted to tell Loopy; how they had sailed to France, all about Mr. Paggott and the two comic Customs officers, but it soon became clear that they weren't going to get more than a word or two in now and again; for Loopy was bursting with a desire to hear his own voice.

"Gee!" he said. "I do envy you. When I came down here I expected to go out sailing every day, or, at least, every fine day. But here I am, after all these perfect English summer days, and we've never left the moorings."

"What a shame!" said Mary.

"You're telling me," went on Loopy; "I knew there was a lot to learn about this sailing game but I didn't know it would take so long to pick up what Mr. Pingleton calls the rudiments."

"Rudiments?" said Mark. "Meaning what?"

"You may well ask," said Loopy. "Rudiments is scrubbing on your hands and knees—*my* hands and knees. Rudiments is polishing brass-work. Rudiments is rowing against the tide to fetch old Pingleton's friends aboard and

rowing them ashore when they've eaten their food and washing up after them." He paused for breath and then went straight on ignoring Mary's sympathetic tongue-clicking.

"And Rudiments is living on Hard Tack and Baked Beans."

"Hard Tack and Baked Beans?" Mary was really shocked. "Is that all?"

"Well, there's a drop of water to wash it down with and I get a bit of chocolate every other day."

There was a shocked silence for a while. Then Mark spoke:

"But why? Goodness knows you're paying him enough. If I were you I'd ask for my money back and buzz off."

"Once or twice," said Loopy, "I've thought of it and then I've said to myself, 'Don't give up, Lomas! Don't give up!' You see this guy Pingleton figures it out this way: if I'm to cross the mighty ocean, I'll have to learn to live hard, mighty hard, and he reckons that Baked Beans are kind of handy. You see, all you have to do is open the can and there's your meal. No cooking and no washing up; just bung it over the side after you've emptied it. And boy! is it nourishing!"

"Sounds pretty ghastly to me," said Mark; "haven't you had anything else?"

"Well," said Loopy; "here's my regular menu: Breakfast—Baked Beans and Biscuit. Dinner—Baked Beans and Biscuit. Tea—Biscuit without Baked Beans, and Supper—for a treat—Baked Beans with Bacon and Biscuit. Gets kind of monotonous."

"Poor Loopy!" said Mary, and she meant it.

"Oh, Lomas can take it," said Loopy; "you see there's something in what the old Buzzard says—he's nothing if not thorough, and he reckons that by the time I've spent three weeks with him a trip across the Atlantic will be like a holiday in Florida. Still, I envy you just the same."

"I think you're being swindled!" said Mark.

"It's not so bad as that," said Loopy. "Sometimes I

almost like old Pingleton. He knows the whale of a lot, does Pingleton, and there's a better time coming soon, 'cause do you know I'm soon going to buy a boat. Old Pingleton's found just the job for a guy like me to mosey across the Herring Pond in. Proper honey she is by all accounts. Tomorrow, or the next day, we're going to have a look at her."

"How exciting!" said Mary. "Where is she?"

"Over in Poole Harbour," said Loopy; "little place called Braggarts Deep; d'you know it?" He went on describing the new ship in such glowing terms that both Mark and Mary began to get excited until Mark asked when this honey of a boat was built and was told 1910.

"Golly!" said Mark. "I thought she was a new one!"

"Oh no," said Loopy, "old Pingleton says they don't build them like they used to—an old boat, he says, is better able to sail in the Trade Winds than one of those newfangled jobs like *Rag Doll*."

"*Rag Doll* newfangled?" said Mark. "What absolute tripe! *Rag Doll*'s modern but she's certainly not newfangled!"

"O.K., O.K.," said Loopy.

"What's her name?" asked Mary, seeking to change the subject before Mark got angry about his beloved *Rag Doll*.

"*Levanter*," said Loopy, "kind of windy sort of name. I must say I'd prefer something a bit more reassuring, like *Friendly Ocean* or *Fair Wind*; but there it is—you can't change boats' names without bringing a lot of bad luck your way—so *Levanter* it is."

"If you do buy her," said Mark, "I'd be careful if I were you."

"I know what you mean," said Loopy, "but don't you worry. I've got a guy coming round to give her the once over tomorrow. He's a kind of specialist in boats and if he says she's sound then I'll be O.K."

How much longer this fascinating conversation would have gone on it is impossible to say if it had not been for

a thin whistling sound that accompanied a lot of steam which started to come out of *Fallen Star's* fore-hatch.

"Oh Gee!" said Loopy. "That's my kettle! Old Pingleton would create something terrible if I burnt it out. So, so long, you guys. See you soon."

He disappeared and they rowed thoughtfully back to *Rag Doll*.

That evening, after a good supper cooked by Mary, the topic of Loopy and his Baked Beans came up again, and because Uncle George was not there to keep the conversation on more rational lines the Greens fairly let themselves go. It was agreed that Mr. Pingleton was a very special kind of toad, and a bit too much. It was also agreed that Loopy was not getting his money's worth. It was also thought that Loopy was in danger of having a worthless old boat sold to him for a very special price. Finally, it was considered that for the sake of the good name of British yachtsmen Loopy ought to be protected from sharks like Pingleton, otherwise he might, on his return to Canada, spread the news that England was the home of thieving swindlers.

From these conclusions it was inevitable that they would decide to do something about it, and it was Binnie who first put their thoughts into an idea.

"—A Secret Society for the protection of Loopy," she suggested. It was such a brilliant thought that even Mark forgot to call his young sister a clot and immediately began to think of a suitable name for the Secret Society. There were many wild suggestions, ranging from "Down with Pingleton" (Ben) to "Prevention of Cruelty to Canadian Yachtsmen" (Mary), but it was Binnie who eventually produced a satisfactory title which had the advantage of spelling out a short word with its initials. So it was agreed that "The Hands Off Loopy Society" (short title HOLS) should come into existence immediately with Mark as President, Mary as Vice, Binnie as Secretary-General, Ben as Treasurer and Polly as Public Relations.

"But what about Uncle George?" asked Mary.

Mark considered for a while. "The trouble is," he said, "that Uncle's not awfully keen on Loopy—not like we are. I mean he likes him but prefers to keep him at a distance. We shall have to be very careful with Uncle or he'll squash the whole thing. He reckons Loopy is a menace and I suppose he's right, really."

"All the same," said Mary, "we shan't be able to protect Loopy without Uncle's help; I think he must be made a member. We'll ask him to join and be Technical Adviser."

This was greeted with acclamation and the next point to be decided was the choice of a Password, for you can't have a Secret Society without passwords; it simply isn't done! Once again it was Binnie who suggested "Rudiments" and once again the word appealed to them all, and it was agreed that the password would be said by any member who became aware that Loopy was in danger of being ill-treated. After that they all began to talk at once until suddenly they started to yawn and realised that it was late and they were jolly tired. So they turned in and dreamed they were saving Loopy from all the manifold pitfalls and dangers which lay in his path.

In the morning some of the glamour of the idea had departed, but enough remained to sustain Mary's determination to tackle Uncle George about the project, and this she did as soon as he returned from London that afternoon. As Mark had foreseen Uncle was not deliriously excited at the prospect of having anything whatsoever to do with Loopy. He pointed out that Loopy was a grown man, and ought to be able to look after himself; but he was forced to agree that this was precisely what Loopy was incapable of doing. Having been dislodged from the defensive point he prophesied that any association with "that young lunatic," as he described the object of their conversation, would lead them all into all sorts of difficulties if not dangers; this line of defence was at once turned by Mary's remark that they couldn't refuse to help a man because it was dangerous. So Uncle George

started to talk about the Chinese. Mary had noticed before that when he was cornered Uncle usually fell back on the civilisation of the Ancient Country of China.

"They understand this sort of thing," he said; "if you pull a drowning Chinaman out of the water you have to support him for the rest of his life. If we once start helping Loopy What's-his-name he may very well become a nuisance and I'll bet my bottom dollar that we'll heartily regret the day we had anything to do with him. Anyway, what makes you think that he's going to be swindled?"

Mary told him about *Levanter*, built in 1910, and as soon as she had done this she saw that Uncle would make no further difficulties.

"That old bag of nails!" he exclaimed. "Why, I sailed in her twenty years ago and she was leaking like a basket then. She must be as ripe as a rotten pear by now. And you say that Pingleton is going to work off that bit of ancient driftwood on your friend?"

"That's what he said," said Mary.

"We can't have that," said Uncle. "If he took that boat out into the open sea and ran into bad weather she'd 'work' the caulking out of her seams in no time."

"Then what?" asked Mark.

"Loopy," said Uncle grimly, "would have to get out and walk and I don't suppose he's very good at that."

"You mean he'd drown?" asked Mary.

"Precisely," said Uncle.

"Then you will join HOLS?" asked Mary.

Uncle sighed. "It looks like it," he said; "now that I know about *Levanter* I'll have to do something."

So Uncle was sworn in and given the password, and immediately took charge of the Society. "The first thing to do," he said, "is to reconnoitre *Levanter*. We'll nip round to Braggarts Deep and have a look at her before the others get there, and if she's as bad as I think she is I'll tell young Loopy not to touch her. How's that?"

"Smashing!" said Mark.

"I say," said Binnie in an excited voice, "*Fallen Star*

is getting ready for sea. Look! She's hoisting her mainsail, and there are two other people on board her besides old Pingleton and Loopy. Do you think they're going to sail to Braggarts Deep?"

"More than likely," said Uncle George.

"Oh dear!" said Mary. "Then we're too late to help Loopy."

"Not a bit of it," said Uncle George; "we can sail rings round that old hulk. We'll get there first. It won't take me long to see what sort of condition *Levanter* is in. So—all hands on deck! Prepare for sea—there's not a moment to be lost!"

Chapter Ten

THE CHINESE ARE USUALLY RIGHT!

THE next quarter of an hour was pretty hectic. *Rag Doll* was far from ready for sea, her sails were covered and her dinghy was afloat. A stiffish breeze was blowing from the north-east which meant that the wind would be behind them when they sailed for Poole. It also meant that *Fallen Star* would go quite fast with a full wind blowing on her great spread of canvas. "I must have half an hour's start," said Uncle George; "jump to it, everyone!" And jump they did. Never before, or since, has *Rag Doll* been got to sea with such speed. Hardly a word was spoken as the Greens turned to with a will. In ten minutes she was away under full canvas, speeding down the river like a frightened bird, gunwale down, leaving a creamy wake behind her.

Podsnap of *Bluebell* saw them go and shouted as they went past. "You look as if you're in a hurry!"

"We are," said Uncle.

"Racing?"

"Sort of." There was no time for any further exchange of pleasantries for already *Bluebell* was out of earshot and the mouth of the river was close ahead.

"Spinnaker," called Uncle George; "and look lively, *Fallen Star's* under way!"

Out came the spinnaker and the next few minutes were fully occupied passing the guys and preparing the sail for hoisting. Then, as soon as *Rag Doll* was clear of Mill Creek, Uncle headed her for the Needles Channel and gave the order "Up Spinnaker!" It went up perfectly and ballooned out at once, straining on its guys and pulling *Rag Doll* along at a tremendous pace.

"Not bad at all," said Uncle George. "Good practice for Cowes week. Now we are moving!"

With a favourable tide, a full sail and the fresh following wind they fairly tore along and by the time the Needles Lighthouse was reached Uncle estimated that they would reach their destination a good half-hour ahead of the other vessel. There was great elation aboard *Rag Doll*, for there is always something particularly pleasant about going on a voyage where there is a definite purpose to achieve. The idea of going into action on behalf of Loopy was a delightful one. Even Uncle George did not look so dreary as his words made him sound. "Fun, is it?" he answered a remark of Mary's. "We'll see if it's fun. Never did like minding other people's affairs for them—bound to lead to trouble. You see! Pass up *Lloyd's Register*, Mary, and let's look up this *Levanter* and see if she's the one I remember. Take the helm, Mark!"

While Mark steered, Uncle flipped over the pages of the *Register* until he found a page full of Ls, beginning with *Laughing Sailors* and ending with *Levanter*.

"Yes," he said; "that's her all right. Built in 1910, auxiliary cutter, ten tons gross. Teak on oak frames." He shut the book and said: "She may be all right."

"How will you know, Uncle?" asked Mary. "Give me ten minutes with a penknife and I'll find something, if it's there," said Uncle, "though I'm not an expert. One thing we must do and that is prevent Loopy from buying the boat before he's had a survey by a qualified man. You see, even if I can't find anything wrong she's such an old packet, and we don't know what may have happened to her, especially during two world wars."

"Do you mean by bombs?" asked Mary.

"Things worse than that because they can't easily be seen," Uncle replied. "Dry rot, for instance. Or Teredo worm which bores into the wood and eats it away until there's nothing but an egg-shell thickness between the inside and outside of the boat. Then, one day, somebody puts his foot through the ship's bottom and——"

"You have to get out and walk," said Binnie.

"That's it," said Uncle. "Then, another thing—iron bolts may have been used to fasten the ship together instead of copper. There's a specially strong acid in oak which eats iron away until one day the planks come off and——"

"—get out and walk!" said Binnie.

"Then suppose at some time or other *Levanter* was in a collision and had to have some planks removed, and the owner was short of money, or the builder was dishonest and put in soft-wood planks which shrink when the boat's hauled up for the winter. Then someone fills the cracks with putty which dries up and drops out when the boat begins to 'work' at sea. Then the water comes in through the cracks. Not much fun having to pump to keep afloat, especially if you're single-handed and far from home."

He'd said enough to make the Greens more than ever determined to save Loopy from the clutches of swindlers. They looked over the stern again at the distant sails of *Fallen Star* and were disturbed to find that she was not by any means falling any further behind. With the following wind even the most clumsily designed sailing-boat will travel fast and *Fallen Star* was a big boat whose top speed was greater, in theory at least, than *Rag Doll's*.

Even Uncle George began to fidget. He took over the tiller again and altered course. "We'll take a short cut where the other folks can't follow us," he said. "*Fallen Star* must draw at least three feet more than we do." So he aimed to cut into the deep-water channel leading to Poole Harbour by passing over the line of sandbanks which runs parallel on the seaward side and thereby saving himself over a mile. The water over the shallows was broken and dirty and for one moment the keel just touched. There was a little bump, *Rag Doll* faltered for a moment and then sped on into the calmer water. "Down Spinnaker!" roared Uncle George. Again they had to get the sail down quickly so that *Rag Doll's* course could be altered

at once to starboard, and her sheets trimmed to the wind which was now blowing from before her beam. Then, as they stowed the spinnaker, its boom and all the ropes belonging to it, Uncle George steered *Rag Doll* into Poole Harbour, past the floating bridge at the entrance, past the Sandbanks Hotel on one hand and Brownsea Island on the other, past the yacht haven and commercial harbour of Old Poole and on up into the inner reaches and little-known creeks in the general direction of Warehaven. And there, at the bottom of a little winding channel, marked by the branches of trees driven into the soft clinging mud, peculiar to that part of the world, they found what they were looking for—a small decrepit yard where Bill Braggart eked out a precarious livelihood as a boat-builder with a little smuggling on the side.

The channel opposite the yard wharf was too narrow for *Rag Doll* to turn under helm, so the sails were lowered and she was allowed to finish the journey under a bare pole. Even so she continued to move at speed, and when Uncle said "Let Go!" and Mark threw the anchor over, the chain-cable rattled out at great speed and it looked as if it would not be able to stop the yacht before all four shackles had run out.

Gradually, however, Mark applied the brake on the winch until the chain came to a standstill. Then, *Rag Doll* rode up to the chain: it stretched out astern taut and grunting under the strain and then it sagged and the yacht swung slowly head to wind. Over went the dinghy and in scrambled the whole party. As a last thought Uncle went back on board and collected some additional items for use in his survey: a steel rule and a sharp spike were added to the penknife which he already had on him.

They then rowed the few dozen yards to the shore, secured the dinghy with its painter round a bollard and walked in search of *Levanter*. Away, down harbour, they could see the rusty brown sails of their pursuer and were well satisfied with the way things had so far gone.

There were several boats hauled up in the yard;

none of them looked attractive but few boats do when they are laid up and haven't been painted.

Mark looked around him with disgust. "Pretty crummy lot, aren't they!" he said. Then he saw one vessel which shone in the sunshine in direct contrast to all the others. She was in a launching cradle, completely rigged and looked in all respects ready for sea.

"That's a better one," said Mary. "She looks jolly nice and shiny."

"That," said Uncle, "is *Levanter*. It's wonderful what a lick of aluminium paint will do to a rusty wire." He put on a conspiratorial voice. "Now listen," he whispered, "and do exactly what I tell you. Take this steel rule, Binnie, and when nobody's taking very much notice of you climb that ladder and get aboard her. Down below in the saloon run your hand along the ship's side until you find wet paint. Got it?"

"Supposing I don't find any?" said Binnie.

"You will," said Uncle George; "and when you do take the rule and push the end into one of the seams of the ship's planking. You'll find soft putty for certain, and when you do, push the steel rule with all your might and main."

"What'll happen?" asked Binnie.

"It'll come through and we shall be standing round to watch for it. If anyone sees it he's to give the password—Rudiments'—and then, when you hear that, Binnie, waggle the rule as much as you can. Got it?"

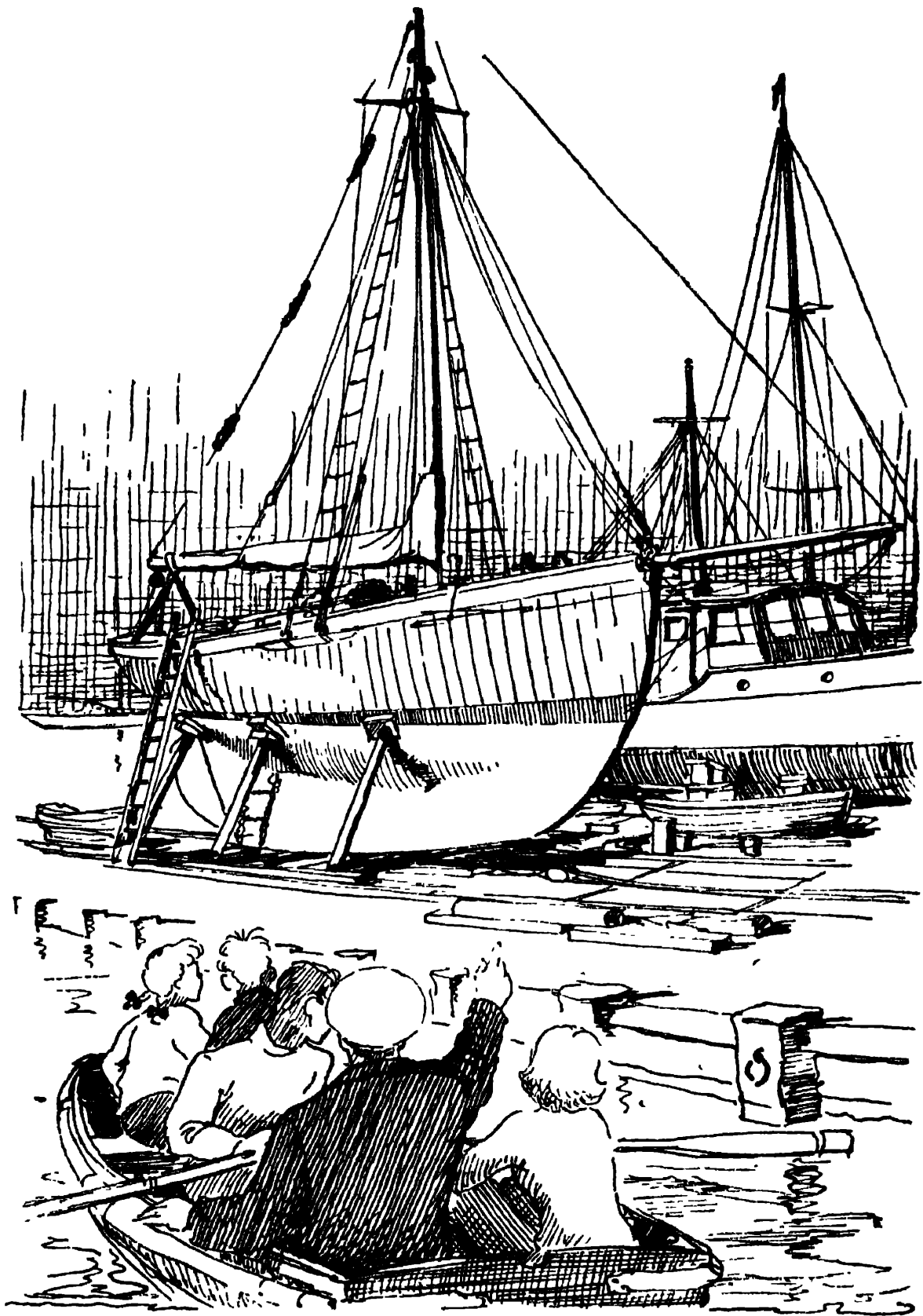
Binnie nodded importantly, her eyes shining with delight.

"Can I have Ben with me to help?" she asked.

"Good idea," said Uncle; "and, by the way, don't be upset if I give you the rough edge of my tongue during this little drama we're staging. I shan't mean it. Now I see Boatyard Bill approaching; hang around and behave like slightly naughty children."

"How do naughty children behave?" whispered Binnie sweetly.

"Gurcher!" said Uncle coarsely.



"That," said Uncle, "is *Levanter*."

He went to meet the man who was looking at the newcomers with a certain amount of distrust in his eyes.

"Good afternoon," said Uncle.

"Arternoon," said Boatyard Bill.

"Lovely day," said Uncle.

No answer.

"Is that *Levanter*?" asked Uncle.

"Yeah." Boatyard Bill's manner was changing at the possibility of being able to do business.

"Are you interested in her?" he asked.

"Very," said Uncle George.

"You'll be the party Mr. Pingleton was telling of."

"It's possible," said Uncle George.

"Well," said Boatyard Bill, "'e didn't give me much notice and you may find the paint's a bit tacky in places."

"D'you hear that, children?" said Uncle fiercely. "Wet paint—so don't touch."

"Yes, Uncle," said Binnic meekly.

"Otherwise," said Uncle fiercely, "I shall be severely displeased. Don't touch anything!"

"No, Uncle," said Binnie.

"I should think not," said Uncle and turned again to Boatyard Bill.

"What's she like?" he asked.

"Well," said Bill, "she's not in her first youth, you know. I'm not pretending she is. Maybe she's a bit ripe in places but if, as I understand, you want her for a sort of a houseboat—she'll last a bit longer."

"I see," said Uncle; "not quite the job for crossing the Atlantic?"

"That's what I meant," said Bill, handsomely; "moor her up somewhere with six inches under her keel so that if she does take a bit of water in she'll not have far to go."

"As bad as that, is she?" said Uncle.

"If I didn't tell you," said Boatyard Bill with refreshing candour, "you'd find out for yourself. I didn't know it was you what Mr. Pingleton had in mind as a customer."

"You know me?" said Uncle.

"Know of you," said Bill. "And I know I've wasted my time, poshin' 'er up for a mug to see."

"That's what I thought," said Uncle. "Have you got anything in this yard that you can recommend?"

"Are you interested in motor-boats?" asked Boatyard Bill.

"I'm interested in all boats," said Uncle George.

"I've a nice conversion job going cheap," said Bill, leading the way to another part of the yard. Uncle George turned fiercely on the Greens and told them not to get up to mischief. Then he went off to take a great deal of interest in the converted motor-cruiser which lay alongside in a small wet-dock.

While he looked at her a sudden thought occurred to him. "Has Mr. Paggott been round here lately?" he asked.

Boatyard Bill started as if he'd been stung by a wasp.

"Isn't that his motor-boat?" went on Uncle George.

"I don't know what you mean," protested Bill. "That there belongs to a friend of Mr. Pingleton's."

"By the name of——?" persisted Uncle George.

"What's it got to do with you?" demanded Bill.

"All right," said Uncle George; "if you'd rather not say there are other ways of finding out. I can always ask Mr. Paggott himself. I fancy he's aboard Mr. Pingleton's boat; unless my eyes deceived me he was helping to hoist her mainsail this afternoon."

"Well," said Boatyard Bill, "if you know all about it you don't 'ave to ask, do you?"

Uncle George had been quite right when he had prophesied wet paint aboard *Levanter*. Binnie and Ben found traces of it everywhere and had soon decided upon the spot where the steel rule should be applied. After that there was nothing more to do but crouch in the cockpit and observe what was going on. Down the little creek they could see *Fallen Star*, lying to her anchor in the deeper water beyond and a dinghy, with four people in it, paddling

cautiously ashore. These would be Mr. Pingleton, Loopy and the two friends. Presently the dinghy reached the shore, three of the crew got out, and the fourth paddled back in the direction of *Rag Doll* and *Fallen Star*.

Then Binnie's attention wandered as she watched Uncle George go to Mark and whisper something to him. And then Mark ran lightly down to the water's edge and got into *Rag Doll's* dinghy. Clearly Uncle George had remembered something he wanted and had sent Mark back for it.

The three newcomers came up the slope where *Levanter* was lying, in deep conversation and quite oblivious of the existence of Uncle George, who had disappeared with Mary behind another boat, or of Binnie and Ben.

"Yes. Your modern boats may be all right for racing round the buoys in the Solent, Mr. Lomas, but for your purpose of crossing deep water you'll not do better than the long keel and straight stem. Eh, Macgreggor?"

The third man, thus addressed, gave a cough, a grunt, and a sneeze, and then said in the broadest Scotch, "Och aye!"

"So that's *Levanter*!" said Loopy. "Well, she's quite a ship!"

"I'm glad you like her, young fellow. It's a tribute to your sense of what is right and proper. Nothing like an old boat. Look at that stern! Look at those buttock lines! Finger-tip steering! Eighteen days out of sight of land and never touched the helm! There's balance for you!"

"Aye," said Mr. Macgreggor, "she's a fine boat. I'm powerful fond of her."

"Is she sound?" asked Loopy.

"Sounder than a good many boats a quarter of her age," replied Mr. Paggott. At that moment Boatyard Bill arrived.

"Arternoon!" he said. "You didn't tell me that Commander Firebrace was coming to look at 'er."

"Commander who?" said Mr. Pingleton.

"'Im what owns *Rag Doll*," said Bill. "There she is, lying just below the wharf."

"Ah, yes," said Mr. Pingleton frostily. "So you invited the Commander to represent your interests, Mr. Lomas?"

"Me?" said Loopy. "I may have mentioned that I was going to look at *Levanter*, but I certainly didn't invite him over here. I wouldn't have liked to have bothered him. But now he's here he'll be able to give his opinion, won't he?"

"For what it's worth," said Mr. Pingleton, "for what it's worth. Naval officers have rather peculiar standards they judge ships by. If you listen to him you'll never buy a boat. What about going aboard her and seeing for yourself? Too much advice will never get you across the Atlantic. Eh, Macgreggor?"

"Sure," said Loopy; "there's no harm in looking. But before I do could you tell me the price? I don't want to waste your time. I may not be able to find enough money if she's too expensive. She looks pretty dear to me."

Mr. Pingleton scratched his head. "What's your limit?" he asked.

"Well," said Loopy, "I wouldn't care to go beyond six thousand dollars; that's a little under two thousand of your pounds, isn't it?"

"I'm glad you raised the point at this stage," said Mr. Pingleton. "It's doubtful if Macgreggor will let her go for that. Isn't it, Macgreggor?"

Mr. Macgreggor grunted and sneezed awhile. "I'm not giving her away," he said gloomily. "She's a grand auld ship. I couldn't take less than"—he cocked an eye at Loopy as if trying to guess the size of his entire fortune—"nineteen hundred guineas," he concluded. Boatyard Bill said something which sounded like Crikey! and ended in a fit of coughing.

Loopy looked puzzled. "I can't get the hang of those guineas of yours," he said; "but never mind. If she's

what I want and you can personally guarantee that she's sound in wind and limb, I don't suppose we'll quarrel about the price."

"He's got a good head on his shoulders," said Mr. Pingleton; "he's not like some of his countrymen—tight-fisted and suspicious—he's a credit to the New World; eh, Macgreggor?"

Macgreggor grunted. "I've been foolish, I know. She's worth five hundred more than I've asked, but I've taken a liking to you, Mr. Lomas. I know you'll look after her. She's a fine auld ship and desairves a good owner. Nineteen hundred guineas it is!"

"Then," said Loopy, putting his foot on the bottom rung of the ladder, "I'll have a look at her."

Binnie and Ben, crouched in the cockpit, didn't know what they ought to do about this, but they needn't have worried. Uncle George had heard everything and now intervened. He stepped out from behind the other boat and Mr. Pingleton looked far from delighted. Loopy, on the other hand, was very pleased. This was just what he always had wanted, he said; buying a boat was something that needed expert advice. What did the Commander think of *Levanter*?

Uncle George's reply was to take out his penknife. "She's been a fine ship in her day," he said and suddenly stuck his knife into a part of the hull on which the paint still gleamed. "But——" He gouged out a piece of soft wood. "This—looks more like deal than teak. And so does this. Now, look at this, Mary. You'll pardon me, gentlemen, if I explain the rudiments of yacht surveying to my little nephews and nieces, won't you? Always teach them the rudiments and they'll pick up the rest. Now where have little Ben and little Binnie got to?"

"There's the password," whispered Binnie. She seized the steel rule and shoved it as hard as she could into the yielding putty of the seam she had chosen.

"Uncle!" she called. "We're here. Aboard *Levanter*."

"Come down at once, you naughty children," shouted Uncle. "You're missing my lecture on the Rudiments of Surveying!"

"Coming!" shouted Binnie and waggled the end of the steel rule. Mary saw it at once.

"Good gracious, Uncle," she said innocently; "what's that funny thing sticking out of the ship's side?"

Uncle George walked towards the shining rule, seized it and pulled it out of the seam, which spewed out crumbs of putty and displayed a gap of nearly a quarter of an inch, while Mr. Macgreggor and Mr. Pingleton exchanged uncomfortable glances.

"Those naughty children!" said Uncle George reflectively. "They've pushed a hole in your ship's side. You'll have to putty it up again before the next buyer comes along."

Loopy's face was a study. It was being borne on his not very clever mind that if a child can poke a steel rule through a ship's side that ship can hardly be described as "well-found." Simple as he was he realised that there must have been a deception in all this and that he was intended to be its victim. He turned to Mr. Pingleton and in a voice more of sorrow than anger said: "Is it a good thing to have putty in cracks like that? I mean if a little boy—I mean there's an awful lot of water in the Atlantic Ocean! You weren't going to let this guy sell me that, were you?"

There was a silence for a moment while Mr. Pingleton sought for a way out. His gaze rested momentarily on Boatyard Bill as if he were deciding whether to lay the blame at his door and reluctantly coming to the conclusion that Bill wouldn't wear it. Then he sought Macgreggor's eyes and then he made up his mind.

"Ha-ha-ha! ha-ha-ha! ha-ha-ha!" His high-pitched voice sounded like a poor imitation of a horse's neigh. Mr. Macgreggor looked surprised but he followed the other's lead, and joined in with a haw-haw-haw-haw!

"I don't get this," said Loopy; "where's the joke?"

"Neither do I, Pingleton," said Uncle; "trying to sell a rotten boat to this youngster is sailing pretty near the wind. It's getting to look like taking money under false pretences."

"Oh dear—oh dear, you'll be the death of me," neighed Mr. Pingleton, "that's what you'll be, Commander Fireplace."

"My name's Firebrace," said Uncle George; "and I want to know what you see funny in what looks to me like a common swindle!"

"Ha-ha-ha!" went Mr. Pingleton.

"Haw-haw-haw!" echoed his partner.

"For Pete's sake tell us what the joke is," said Loopy.

"Oh dear, oh dear!" Mr. Pingleton wiped his eyes.

"All this is part of the curriculum."

"Part of what?" asked Loopy.

"How *not* to buy a boat. That's it," said Mr. Pingleton.

"And you were completely taken in, wasn't he, Macgreggor?"

"Och aye," said Macgreggor. "If it hadn't been for the Commander we could have sold you the old crock, couldn't we? Be honest, Mr. Lomas, you were going to buy, weren't you?"

Loopy rubbed his nose, a puzzled expression on his face. "I still don't get it. I thought you wanted me to buy her, and now you say you didn't."

"Dear boy," said Mr. Pingleton, "so obtuse! Now let me explain in words of one syllable. Then you'll understand. That-boat-is-not-for-sale. We-do-not-sell-bad-boats. But-you-would-have-bought-that-one-if-we-had-let-you. Would-you-not?"

"You mean," said Loopy, "all this was a kind of put-up job to teach me a lesson?"

"Ah," said Mr. Pingleton happily, "he sees the light, Macgreggor. We haven't wasted our time. But"—he squinted maliciously at Uncle George—"but I'm afraid we've effectively pulled the legs of Commander Firegrate

and his bevy of young hopefuls—very effectively. Ha-ha-ha! Ho-ho-ho!”

Loopy looked around him unhappily. “You know,” he said, after a moment’s thought, “you had me completely. I’ll admit it freely and I feel I owe you an apology for imputing unworthy motives to your well-intentioned lesson on buying a boat.”

“Don’t think of it again,” said Mr. Pingleton; “when we took you on to give you instruction we charged you a high fee. No doubt you—and your friends here”—he gave another unfriendly nod towards Uncle George, Mary, Binnie and Ben—“thought that my fees were out of proportion to the money spent on your education. Now, you see that it was not. It has cost us quite a packet to get this vessel into her present condition so that you would be properly deceived. There will be very little profit, Mr. Lomas. Very little.”

“Now that’s real thorough, and I appreciate it all,” said Loopy. “And I feel sure that the Commander here feels the way I do?” He looked hopefully at Uncle George who was fighting a battle with himself. He was pretty certain that his intervention had saved Loopy a small fortune and possibly his life, but in the face of such smooth protestations there was no point in levelling accusations which he couldn’t possibly sustain. What was more, he wouldn’t have put it past this crook to turn the tables by threatening an action for slander. Uncle George knew he had been outwitted. He looked hard at Mr. Pingleton and said:

“This young man thinks I owe you an apology——”

Mr. Pingleton held up his hand.

“My dear fellow—not another word. Your solicitude for him reflects nothing but credit on yourself. He is very fortunate to have found such well-meaning friends, who will go to such great lengths to protect his interests. I hope you will reap a suitable reward, if not in this world, then certainly in the next. Ha-ha-ha!”

“Haw-haw-haw!” echoed Mr. Macgreggor.



Mr. Pingleton held up his hand.

"Come on," said Uncle George shortly. He turned on his heel and went down to where Mark was waiting with the dinghy while the laughter of the two men followed them with venomous intensity.

Nobody spoke as they piled aboard *Rag Doll's* dinghy and it wasn't until they'd got back and had brewed a pot of tea that Uncle had recovered his temper to allow himself to speak of their crushing defeat. It was Mary, as ever the peacemaker, who found a way of saving Uncle's lost "face." "You were absolutely right, Uncle," she said.

"What about?" said Uncle George.

"About the Chinese and what would happen if we tried to help Loopy. You prophesied disaster, didn't you?"

"Yes," said Uncle, "so I did. So I did. Mind you," he went on more cheerfully, "there's no doubt at all that we did save Loopy from the clutches of those thieves. No doubt at all."

"Then it's been worth while?" asked Mary. Uncle looked grim.

"He'll probably get into worse trouble now," he said.

"I don't believe that Loopy's half so silly as he makes himself out to be," said Mary. Uncle smiled for the first time and made a little joke.

"That's certainly possible," he said. He was so pleased that he repeated it.

After that the atmosphere cleared considerably though no one dared mention the "Hands Off Loopy Society" for quite a while. As it was now late Uncle decided to remain at anchor for the night where they now were.

Presently *Fallen Star's* dinghy passed them with its load of three crooks and one person whom ill-bred persons would describe as a mug. Did I say *three* crooks? I did; for Mark had already reported, firstly, that the fourth member of the crew was Mr. Paggott, and secondly, that in returning to *Rag Doll* he had been just in time to surprise Mr. Paggott as he was climbing aboard her. Mr. Paggott apparently had brought some special Birdfood for Polly and departed after leaving it behind.

"I wonder how long he would have stayed and what he would have done if Mark hadn't returned?" said Mary. Uncle looked very thoughtful.

What was it that Mr. Paggott was after aboard *Rag Doll*?

He went to the radio telephone and called "Stormcock."

Chapter Eleven

“PRIDE GOETH BEFORE A FALL”

THE next day was again fine. The wind had dropped, and the sky was blue. It was difficult to be depressed about anything; Uncle George had recovered his good spirits, and took *Rag Doll* away from Braggarts Deep with the best of good humour.

They sailed out of Poole Harbour, across Christchurch Bay, and into Mill Creek, with a gentle sea-breeze, which gradually freshened as the sun grew high in the heavens.

Podsnap of *Bluebell* saw them come in, and waved a cheerful greeting. “Coming to Cowes?” he asked, and Uncle said: “Wouldn’t miss it for anything. I’ve something up my sleeve this time.”

“What is it?” shouted Podsnap.

“Wait and see,” said Uncle. The Greens were very interested by this exchange, for Uncle hadn’t previously said very much about Cowes Week. They all knew, of course, that it was the greatest yachting festival of the year, and they knew that racing at Cowes would be a tough proposition, compared to their local regattas, and occasional off-shore races; but what was the surprise in store for Mr. Podsnap? They didn’t have to wait long to find out, for it was delivered aboard as soon as they had picked up their moorings. Joe brought it out. It was a white canvas sailbag, on which was printed “*Rag Doll*. Spinnaker!”

“But we’ve got one,” said Binnie. She had half hoped for something more in keeping with the events of the past week—a sub-machine-gun would have suited her mood better—but when the bag was opened, and a beautiful egg-shell blue sail, made of the finest Nylon was revealed, she too joined with the others in songs of praise.

"Now," said Uncle, as they fingered the fine texture of the material, almost reverently, "this is a light-weather job, and a very difficult one to handle. You see this stuff will blow about like thistledown, and if we're not careful it will be over the side in a jiffy. We shall have to revise our methods of hoisting it, and getting it down again, completely. Our present spinnaker is half the size of this, and, as you know, is made of heavier material. This one will have to be made up in 'stops' before hoisting." He demonstrated the various changes in "drill" they would have to make, and showed them how to make up the sail by rolling it tightly until it turned into a pale blue "snake," which was "stopped" with a special twine called "Rotten cotton" at intervals of about eighteen inches all along its entire length. When the sail was thus "stopped" it could be hoisted with its guys and sheets attached to it, ready to control it when the lower stops were broken by a sharp tug. Then, the wind, blowing into the piece of sail thus exposed, would cause the other "stops" to burst, and the whole thing would open like a gigantic parachute.

Getting it down would present a much greater problem than hoisting it, for the flimsy material would billow and resist every attempt to smother it.

Patiently and at length Uncle went through the drill. "This little job has cost me a lot of money," he said; "one mistake and we may rip it to pieces. Now, our first race is tomorrow, so I suggest that we sail for Cowes immediately and practice with the spinnaker all the way there." And so they set off.

As soon as they had reached a position where *Rag Doll* could be put before the wind the spinnaker drill began. As Uncle had foreseen, the sail went up beautifully, in fact beauty was the operative word throughout; the pale blue material gleamed nobly in the sun, and *Rag Doll* seemed to lift bodily out of the water under the stimulus of this new driving force.

When it was up they sat back and gloried in their

efforts. Once again Uncle George went through the drill for getting it down. The secret of success lay in blanketing the gigantic sail by easing the spinnaker boom right forward until the wind was spilled out of the spinnaker and it flapped idly under the lee of the mainsail. Then, with one person tending the halyard, another must unclip the sail from the boom, thus allowing it to fly out to leeward like a flag, while the remainder must haul the other corner inboard as the sail was gradually lowered. It sounded easy enough as Uncle described it, but they found it as much as they could manage to prevent the sail blowing out of their clutches over the side and into the water. There was a breathless struggle when it was half down, and the halyard jammed, but they succeeded, and presently *Rag Doll's* fo'c'sle was covered by the crumpled spinnaker, on which the Greens were sitting to keep it under control.

“Now we'll do it again,” said Uncle. “First of all, pass it down below and set it up in stops once more.” So the unwieldy sail was rolled up and made ready for hoisting and soon it was up again, billowing in the steady breeze. And again they gaped in admiration at the lovely thing.

“Down Spinnaker!” ordered Uncle. Down it came, without a hitch this time, and they were all delighted with it, and themselves. They perched upon it and discussed ways and means of still further improving their methods, and, while they did so, disaster came upon them with awful suddenness. One moment they were sprawling about on the pale blue thing of beauty, and the next they were frantically trying to save it from destruction. What had happened was that a bight of material had slipped over the side, creeping down the bows until it met the water. Then, the forward motion of *Rag Doll* had transferred the submerged part of the sail into a large drogue (or sea-anchor) and it was swept aft, pulling with enormous strength on the rest of the sail. Too late Uncle George saw the trouble. He put his helm hard “down” to bring

Rag Doll hard to wind, and take the speed off her; but, as he did so amid cries of alarm and distress, the rest of the sail disappeared over the side with the ominous sound of torn silk, and streamed out astern a tattered remnant of what had been a perfect example of the sailmaker's art. It was a horrid moment for everyone; in a few seconds to be hurtled into a state of demoralisation. They were all shattered at the completeness of the catastrophe, and for a moment stood staring at the wreck of all their hopes. Then Uncle George pulled himself together. Cleverly putting *Rag Doll* into a "hove-to" position with her mainsail gently shaking, he lashed the tiller, and helped the Greens to haul in the sodden wreck of twisted Nylon. It looked terrible, nothing but jagged holes everywhere. No one said a word; they were still suffering from the shock of surprise. When it was all inboard *Rag Doll* was put away and a course was set for Cowes. Each one of the Greens felt that it was their fault, but it didn't really matter whose fault it was. The damage was done; they could hardly bear to look at that shapeless sodden mass.

Uncle George lit his pipe carefully and then said: "I've never seen such a downcast looking lot of mugwumps as you are. Cheer up!"

"I'm awfully sorry, sir," said Mark.

Uncle grinned. "So am I," he said, "but I'm not going to allow it to spoil my pleasure. I command you all to stop looking like a parcel of juvenile delinquents. I knew the risks we were running when I got the perishing thing. We'll go into the causes of the trouble later on. Meanwhile, up with the other spinnaker! We must get to Cowes as fast as we can and get it repaired."

"Repaired?" said Mary. "But, Uncle, it looks beyond repair!"

"Don't you believe it," said; Uncle "we'll get it ashore tonight and it'll be ready for racing tomorrow. These sailmakers will think nothing of a little job like this, as long as we can get the stuff dry and, since it's made of Nylon, that won't hold them up. It's beginning to dry already."

“Then it isn’t completely ruined?” asked Mark.

“Not a bit of it!” said Uncle.

“I don’t think I shall ever have the nerve to hoist it again,” said Mary.

“Miserable child,” said Uncle; “you mustn’t lose your nerve as easily as that. Far worse things than that will happen to you before you reach my age, and when they do you’ve got to just shake them off you as if they were drops of water on a duck’s back. No brooding—is the watchword for today. Now what about that spinnaker?”

“Come on, Greens,” said Mark. “Let’s get cracking!”

Five minutes later the old spinnaker was flying out in the breeze, and Egypt Point, which marked the end of the land off Cowes, began to loom up large.

As it did so the sting of disaster became less painful and they began to discuss the delights and adventures which were contained in the two words: “Cowes Week.”

Chapter Twelve

OLD FRIENDS—AND OTHERS

THE direction from which *Rag Doll* was approaching Cowes prevented the Green Sailors from having what the film people call a "Preview" of the scene which was being enacted there, and it was not until Egypt Point had been reached that Cowes Roads came into sight. With it was presented to their interested gaze a wonderful picture of a vast assembly of every kind of sailing vessel to be encountered around the shores of this country. The Roadstead, as the anchorage off the mouth of the river Medina is called, was crowded with yachts, lying to their anchors, or to their moorings, and through these stationary vessels, gay with bunting, were sailing a large number of smaller class-racing yachts. Up and down the main channel, which runs to the upper reaches of the river, a number of heavily laden motor-cruisers were patrolling, their occupants busily engaged in pointing out the various famous yachts which were gathered around them; and further up, on the starboard side of the channel, was a veritable forest of masts, where some hundred or so larger yachts were moored alongside each other in batches of about a dozen each, with their bows and sterns secured to mooring buoys.

Between all these vessels little dinghies with popping exhausts were scurrying. All this was in addition to the usual activity of the port in which the great ferry steamers crowded with sightseers cautiously felt their way to the landing-piers.

To the Greas, who were used to sailing into little-frequented harbours and creeks, the intense activity was positively unnerving. So much was going on; so many vessels appeared to be steering straight for them, there

were so many diversions in the sounds of starting guns, the revving-up of the Princess flying-boat's engines on the slipway, the hooting and tooting of the ferry steamers, the deep-toned diaphone of a passing Atlantic liner, and the distant babble of the large crowd of spectators on the foreshore, that it was difficult to concentrate on doing anything at all. But if they were confused, Uncle George was not. He stood in the cockpit, pipe in mouth, and a seraphic smile on his face, as he steered *Rag Doll* into the middle of this frenzied mass of shipping. Uncle George adored Cowes Week, he was used to the hubbub and knew where 'he was going; this latter knowledge was the secret of his perfect confidence in these difficult waters, for while other vessels' skippers, erratically steering, shouting frantically at everybody, craning their necks and popping their eyes in search of a resting-place for their yachts, looked as if they were ready to expire from sheer anxiety, Uncle George placidly set course for the aforementioned forest of yachts' masts, under full sail, blissfully conscious of the fact that, as a vessel under sail, *Rag Doll* had the right-of-way over the less courageous yachts who had pulled down their canvas and were motoring in all directions.

When she was well into Cowes Harbour, *Rag Doll* was put head to wind, the sails were lowered, the engine started, warps and fenders were prepared, and she was taken gently alongside *Bluebell*, who had just arrived from Mill Creek. Podsnap, as usual, was cackling like a barn-door fowl, shouting instructions to his crew of long-haired louts, and occasionally urging them on with playful taps with a sail-batten, which came handy for the purpose, but he was delighted to see his deadly rival, and helped to take *Rag Doll*'s warps. The next quarter of an hour was frantically busy, for the dinghy had to be got out quickly before another yacht came alongside. Then, long bow and stern warps must be run out to the mooring buoys, fenders placed, sails stowed and covered, and everything made neat. Then, the poor tattered remnants of the Nylon spinnaker was bagged and put aboard the dinghy, and

Uncle George went off with it to the sailmakers. Then, and only then, was there really time to have a good look round, and what a sight it was!

They hadn't expected anything quite like this; there was so much to look at and so many strange boats flying the ensigns of foreign countries that Mary was reluctant to go below even to boil a kettle. Uncle George hadn't told them very much—all he had said was that—"anybody who is anybody goes to Cowes Week." To the Greens it seemed that *everybody* was *anybody* for they began to recognise friends or acquaintances everywhere. Under this latter category they saw the detestable Jurgén Twins, sailing in a brand-new dinghy, and dressed in flashy red stocking-caps and identical sweaters. If the Jurgén Twins saw them they were not recognising them, but even the hostile Greens were bound to admit that their enemies had come on a lot as sailors if as nothing else. They watched them taking their taut little craft through the maze of shipping with considerable skill and with the grace of an ice-skater, and they sniffed with a tinge of jealousy in their scorn. The Jurgéns had no right to be sailing at all, nor would they have been if Uncle George and the Greens hadn't risked their lives to rescue them from the consequences of their own folly;* and yet here they were, showing off as usual, with not even a friendly wave to their saviours. "Toads!" said Mark, and they all agreed.

Then they saw another unloved acquaintance: a certain Mr. Luff Schooling,† at the helm of a six-metre. He too was fancifully attired in a pink shirt and a white jockey-cap. If he saw *Rag Doll*, he too disdained to recognise her occupants. "Toads!" said Binnie automatically. Again there was unanimity in their verdict.

"You can always tell," said Mary, meditatively, "whether you like people or not when you meet them unexpectedly. For example, I thought I didn't like Podsnap of *Bluebell*, but now"—she lowered her voice as he was not very far

* *Green Sailors on Holiday.*

† *Green Sailors Ahoy!*

away from her—"now I'm quite glad we're lying next to him."

"Oh, look!" cried Ben, excitedly. "There's Mr. Simon Smeltigew!"†

Sure enough it was the famous author. He was dressed in immaculate white flannel trousers, and blue reefer coat, with brass buttons, and the sort of yachting cap that one usually sees on the heads of the male chorus in a musical comedy. He was seated in a low canvas chair, with a typewriter on his knee at the after-end of an expensive-looking motor-cruiser, whose stern was but a few yards from *Rag Doll's* bows. They knew at once how glad they were to see him, but wave as they would, and call as they did, Mr. Smeltigew was deep in the throes of composition and had no ears or eyes for anything else. Presently, however, he finished his work, and folded up his typewriter. As he stood up he saw *Rag Doll* and he looked delighted. "My dear young friends," he called. "I'm delighted to see you all again."

"Come and have tea," called Mary.

"Another day," he said. "I have a task to perform. I am Yachting Correspondent to the *Chimes* newspaper, and I must go ashore to phone my account of the day's racing. I mustn't keep my editor waiting." He gave an exaggerated salute, turned to go, tripped over a ring-bolt on the deck and fell on his face. When he had got up again he shouted: "How is your Uncle?"

"Very well," called Mary.

"Splendid, splendid," said Mr. Smeltigew, giving yet another salute. He tripped again and all but fell. Then he turned once more. "And Polly?"

"Fine," said Ben.

"Admirable!" said Mr. Smeltigew. This time he managed to avoid the numerous pitfalls and reached the motor-yacht's gangway, where a smart little "Skim-dish" was lying.

"Goodness gracious!" said Mary. "He's surely not

† *Green Sailors, Ahoy!*

going to drive that thing himself!" Mr. Smeltigew got in, placed his typewriter beside him, and started the engine. It went off with a roar and a flurry and he put it into gear. Nothing happened for a moment and he looked surprised and cut the engine out.

"Mr. Smeltigew!" called Mary.

"Yes, my dear?" he answered.

"You didn't let go the bow and stern-lines," she said softly, for she didn't want to make more of an exhibition of Mr. Smeltigew than he himself had.

"Most kind of you," he said; "I knew there was something. I don't really know how this thing works, you know. I've chartered it for the Week."

At that moment a yacht-hand came on deck, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "Couldn't you wait till I'd 'ad me tea?" he said sourly, and casting off he took the little vessel away with Mr. Smeltigew waving frantically to his old friends.

"He's such a nice man," said Mary.

"He's as wet as a scrubber," said Mark, "but you can't help liking him. And what an extraordinary thing for him to be a Yachting Correspondent! He doesn't know as much about it as we do!"

Whilst they were still reflecting upon this remarkable phenomena of Mr. Smeltigew in his new role, they became aware of a high-pitched whistling sound, punctuated by cries of "Wotcher, me old Green Sailors!" They looked all round them at the clustered boats, but they couldn't see anyone they knew.

"Someone's calling us," said Mary; "listen!" There it was. "Ay-ay! 'Ere we are again!" said the voice.

"It's Sidney,"* said Mary; "now, where in all the world can he be?"

"Look aloft!" called the voice. "Up 'ere—that's where I am!"

They saw him at once, sitting in a bos'n's chair at the top of the hundred-foot mast of a schooner, lying in the

* *Green Sailors, Ahoy!*

same "trot" as *Rag Doll*. There he was, swinging in his little seat, working with a serving mallet and a ball of marling, as coolly as if he were sitting in an arm-chair; and as he manipulated the tool with graceful skill he talked to them. "Wait till I've finished this little lot," he said, "and then I'll come and 'ave a nice littul natter over a cup o' char!"

"I'll put the kettle on," said Mary; "Uncle will be surprised."

Five minutes later Sidney gave a piercing whistle to another man who was standing on deck ready to lower him when the work was finished.

"O.K., me old cock sparrow!" he called. A minute later he was aboard *Rag Doll*, talking sixteen to the dozen. "Got a good steady job," he said, "thanks to the Commander, 'oo put a word in for me. All me troubles behind me now. The money's good, the company's good, and that schooner is a daisy. Fast! You've got to keep your 'at on or your 'air would blow away. 'Fast and wet,' as they say. Fast and wet."

"What's her name?" asked Mark. "*Camellia*," said Sidney; he lowered his voice and went on. "Only thing the matter with 'er is 'er owner. Cor! That chap never ought to own a boat wiv sails! 'Ouseboat on the Thames is about 'is style. When there's a nice breeze 'e says it's too windy. 'E's the bloke what's windy—if you see what I mean. Still, I mustn't complain. He pays us well, and it is 'is packet arter all. Still! I could do with a good sail, now and again. Sort of tones you up, as you might say. 'Ow's the Commander?"

"None the worse for seeing you, Sidney," said Uncle George who had arrived unobserved at that moment. Sidney took his hand and shook it like a pump handle.

"This is something like!" he said with tears in his eyes. "Puts me in mind of that trip we did acrost the Channel. Never 'ad a better voyage."

"Tea's ready!" called Mary.

And what a tea it was! Everybody talked at once and

everybody talked with his mouth full of some very special food which started with boiled eggs and toast and went on to fruit salad and ice-cream (which Uncle had brought off from the shore) and four different kinds of cake. And when they could eat no more they sort of lay back on the settees while Sidney went on talking. How long the party would have gone on for there's no knowing, if one of the *Camellia's* crew hadn't stuck his head down the hatch. "'Ere, Sidney!" he said, "the Skipper wants you. He's creating something 'orrible."

"Blimey!" said Sidney. "I clean forgot. I'd promised to teach him a bit o' wire-splicing. A man of 'is age not knowing a simple thing like that! 'E ought to 'ave a motor-cruiser, that's what 'e ought to 'ave. Ta-ta for now, and ta for everything, sir."

When he was gone some of the sparkle seemed to have gone out of the day.

Mary had been quite right in what she had said. They knew now that they were all very fond of Sidney, and he of them.

Chapter Thirteen

SOMETHING LIKE A RACE!

POPULAR as Cowes is as the headquarters of yachting in the south of England, it is by no means a perfect anchorage, for, when the wind blows the surface of the harbour is disturbed and life aboard the small craft moored there becomes uncomfortable.

During the night the Greens, lying in their bunks, heard the whistle and whine of the wind in the rigging. This was soon joined by a succession of jarring "bump-bumps" as the sixteen yachts which comprised the "Trot" in which *Rag Doll* was moored, started to nudge each other, as they rose and fell in the little "sea" which was being created by the wind.

Uncle George, talking to himself in a strange language, which on a previous occasion when he had been questioned by Ben, he had described as "Three words of Swahili," turned out and went on deck to readjust and reinforce the warps and fenders, and presently when *Rag Doll's* crew had got accustomed to this motion they all fell asleep and dreamed that they were in mid-ocean, waking early in the morning and lying uneasily in their bunks, listening to the high-pitched sound of the wind, and wondering what the day would bring forth.

As their race was due to start at ten o'clock it was necessary to get up early, so that breakfast could be got out of the way and everything got ready for the strenuous times ahead. There was no doubt, Uncle said, as they watched the clouds racing overhead, that they were in for a dusting. There was no need to listen to the weather forecast, they could see for themselves. Nevertheless the radio was switched on and confirmed their opinions.

"Portland, Wight, Dover——" said the cheerful voice of an announcer, in a snug studio at Broadcasting House. "Wind fresh, or strong, south-westerly. Visibility good except in rain squalls, veering and moderating tonight."

"Not so good," said Uncle; "how are the muscles, Mark?"

"Not too bad, Uncle," Mark grinned.

"You'll need all you've got," said Uncle George; "we're a bit light-handed for whizzing round the buoys on a day like this."

"We'll manage, won't we, chaps?" said Mark.

"Rather," said the Greens loyally.

"Of course we will," said Uncle, "but that's not the point. I'm intending to win this race, and to do this we want more beef than we've got aboard here."

"Couldn't we ask Sidney?" said Mary.

Uncle shook his head. "Sidney is in the employ of the owner of *Camellia*. We can't just pinch him for the day."

"Not 'arf you can't, Guvnor," said Sidney, who had stepped aboard at that moment; "got a day's 'oliday. *Camellia*'s not going out today. Owner reckons it's blowing too 'ard. Always is with him—I told you, didn't I? So I thought Ay-Ay! what about a nice day-sail with the Commander, and 'is nice little nephews and nieces, if you see what I mean?"

"Well," said Uncle doubtfully, "I won't say you're not welcome on a day like this, but—are you sure it's all right?"

"Sure," said Sidney; "I'm always grouching about the owner, but 'e's a kind-hearted sort of a chap really."

"Then that's fine," said Uncle. "Let's get cracking!"

There was plenty to be done. The bow and stern warps had to be unfastened from the buoys (Sidney did that); the dinghy had to be moored alongside the *Camellia* (Sidney did that too); the two yachts moored outside them had to be warned that *Rag Doll* was going (Uncle did that for fear that Sidney might not be so tactful);

four rolls had to be put in the mainsail, without hoisting it (they all had to do that to make sure that the sail was evenly rolled and wouldn't go all baggy at one end when it was hoisted); Number Two jib had to be bent on; canvas covers had to be lashed over the hatch and skylight; the small spinnaker had to be prepared (Uncle did not even go ashore to fetch the Nylon one under repair, he said it was blowing far too hard); and the engine had to be started. When all was ready, the two outer yachts were told to drop their bow-warps loosely into the water and *Rag Doll* nosed her way out ahead over them, followed by her most deadly rival, *Bluebell*, on board of which vessel a lively scene was being enacted. Podsnap of *Bluebell* was a noisy cackling sort of a man who always assumed that those who were sailing with him had just escaped from a home of mental defectives. He never trusted anyone to do the right thing, never mind how many times they'd done it. So he always told them what to do—all the time—in a voice to which the Green Sailors had become thoroughly accustomed. They'd heard him at sea in the middle of the night, in harbour, at the local Yacht Club, in fogs—Uncle said he was better than any commercial fog-horn—and in their dreams. "Yatter! Yatter! Yatter!" said Mark to himself, as he heard Podsnap barking at long-haired louts who were doing their best but not well enough. What a difference there was between *Bluebell* and *Rag Doll* in that respect! Fond as he was of sailing Mark registered the thought that he would never sail under Podsnap as Skipper, even though he was a very good helmsman. "Too much talkee-talkee," said Mark, and Sidney nodded in agreement.

"That merchant'd 'ave the hind leg off of a donkey," he said. "Friend o' yours?"

"In a way, yes," said Mark. "He's not as bad as he sounds."

"Now isn't that lucky," said Sidney.

Rag Doll was motoring slowly past the other trots of yachts when the greatest activity prevailed. Nearly all

the boats were preparing to sail and as the Greens looked round them there seemed to be an endless procession of sailing craft, scurrying towards the open waters of the Solent.

As soon as she was in a position to do so, Uncle George put *Rag Doll* head to wind and nodded to Sidney and Mark. They were ready waiting, and hoisted the mainsail at top speed. When it was well and truly up and fluttering in the breeze Uncle gave another nod and Mary, helped by Mark, hoisted the Number Two jib, while Sidney coiled up the halyards and generally tidied around; and Binnie and Ben, their faces shining pink under their black oilskin sou'westers, handled the foresheets. Where they now were the full force of the wind could not be felt, but they could see by the antics of other boats that had gone before them that there was all the wind in the world outside, and they never felt more grateful in their lives to Providence for the presence of the extra man in the crew. Everything that Sidney did gave them confidence. He seemed to know where all the ropes were, without looking; his hands were everywhere. Before Uncle George had time to put the helm over and fill the sails he had squared off the upper deck for sea, had arranged with Mark about who was to do what, had lit a cigarette with a single match, and had flopped down on the deck out of the way of Uncle George's vision, and so as not to crowd the cockpit, and his face was a picture of contentment and confidence. The spirits of the four Greens, which had been slightly damped by the force of the wind, steadily soared and they felt that they were going to win.

Now that *Rag Doll* was under way, with everything secured and ready for the big race, there was time to examine the situation, and work out plans. There were about twenty yachts of varying sizes competing. *Rag Doll*, with her twelve-ton displacement, was in the "middle-cut" for size; when it came to handicaps, however, she was not quite so favourably placed as some of the boats of a more extreme design, but in this blustery weather she ought,

not only to sail right up to her maximum possible performance, but to have the advantage of being a heavily-built vessel which would not be stopped easily by the dirty seas which they might expect to encounter on such a day as this. *Bluebell*, her sister-ship, she would have to race level with. This was an enormous advantage, for here was a "race within a race." Whatever tricks the handicappers may have played with some of those outrageously ugly modern vessels there would be no argument in this "private" battle with *Bluebell*. "Nothing else matters," said Uncle George. "He'll take a lot of holding on a day like this, with that crowd of slobs on board. Good job we've got Sidney!"

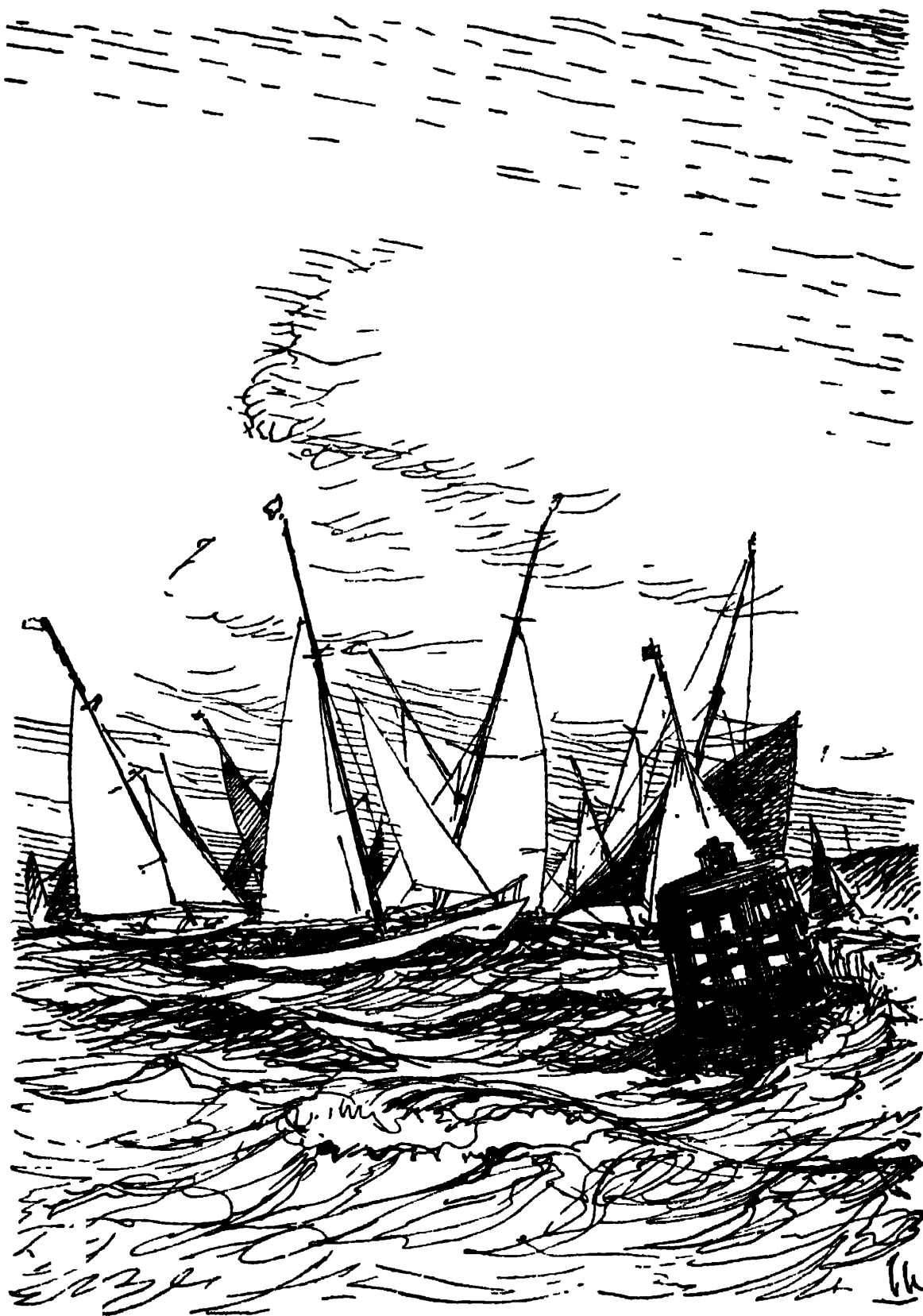
The course, which they had to sail twice round, would be a long one, for it meant sailing from the starting line off Cowes and tacking right into the wind's eye and *against* the tide all the way to a buoy off Newtown called Hamstead Ledge. That, said Uncle George, would practically decide the race. Whoever got round first after that five-mile flog to windward would stand the best chance of winning. From Hamstead the course took them to Calshot Light Float—that would be a spinnaker run, with both wind and tide to help them. From the Light Float their course would then take them to a buoy off Ryde, also with a free wind and a fair tide; thence they would have a "close-fetch" back to the finishing line. The second time round would not be so strenuous, for the tide would have turned so that it would be opposing the direction of the wind, and thus make short work of the beat to windward. The plan, therefore, must be to hug the shore close to the Isle of Wight so as to keep out of the main strength of the tide, until Hamstead Ledge was rounded. After that, said Uncle, it would be a case of the shortest distance between two points being a straight line.

Having carefully considered the Race instructions, Uncle eased *Rag Doll* out of the sheltered waters of the Medina into the rough and tumbling seas which were sweeping down the Solent from Egypt Point. The contrast

between the true wind and that which they had been feeling in harbour was very great. Many a novice had been forced back into harbour with his sails in tatters for failing to understand what strength of wind he could expect to find outside. Even some of the experienced sailing men in this regatta were unprepared for such a wind and came scurrying back to shorten sail, before going out once more to try their luck. *Rag Doll* was certainly not under-canvassed. She positively staggered as the first hard puff hit her. Down went her gunwale, until water was swirling almost up to the coaming of the cockpit. Then, as she gathered way some of the angle came off. Sidney nodded with approval as Uncle kept her sailing on the same course and trimmed his mainsail sheets to get the best performance to windward. "No good trying to point as high as some of these modern types," he shouted; "got to get her going at her top speed, that's the best we can do."

Sidney grinned and climbed down into the cockpit. "Reckon it's going to be too wet up topsides," he said as he hustled Ben and Binnie into the "dog-house." "There's no need for all of us to be out in the open, you'll 'ave a nice view of the sea through the windows, and you won't get a drop of water on you. 'Ow's that?"

"Boom!" The smoke of the ten-minute gun came rolling across the starting line, and Uncle George put on his concentration face. From now on, until the race was over, he would expect instant obedience and a minimum of chatter, especially at the start, for at the speed that all the racing yachts were going it needed only a few seconds' inattention to cause a collision. It was a wonderful, if somewhat frightening scene. The sky was dark overhead, and the waters of the Solent had taken on a similar slaty-blue colour, relieved everywhere by broken water and flecks of foam. The heavily-reefed yachts had lost most of their beauty—the billowing canvas of yesterday had taken on a starved look, for the ends of their masts and booms stuck out beyond their reefed sails like the arms and



The heavily-reefed yachts had lost most of their beauty

legs of someone whose clothes are too small for him. Instead of solid and stable movement the boats were heeling over and swooping along, their crews swathed in oilskins. When the hard puffs came whirling down on them they careened to such an extent that even their keels were exposed.

Podsnap of *Bluebell*, sitting high up to windward, was putting his boat over at an excessive angle by sailing her off the wind with her sheets hard pinned. *Bluebell* whizzed past under their stern and they heard his high-pitched voice giving his crew some last-minute instructions. Then he turned and waved exultingly to *Rag Doll* and shouted: "Blood for breakfast! Ha-ha!"

"What did he mean?" asked Mary, spitting out a little salt water which had just sloshed her in the face.

"A figure of speech," said Uncle George, "meaning that competition may be expected to be very keen. Now, we'll follow Mr. Podsnap wherever he goes and we'll worry him until he starts to find fault with his crew. Then he'll take his mind off the race which will be a good thing for *Rag Doll* and all aboard her."

They loved the way Uncle always talked to himself at the beginning of a race: it was almost as if they could actually see his brain working. After *Bluebell* sped *Rag Doll*, twisting and turning to avoid other yachts which were on the starboard tack. Mary sat in the bottom of the cockpit, watching the hands of the stop-watch which she had started with the sound of the ten-minute gun. "Stand by, Uncle!" she intoned, "for the five-minute gun. Twenty seconds to go—ten—five—four—three—two—one—Gun!" Boom! went the gun as if Mary had fired it herself.

"We can run out into the tide and come back on the starboard tack when we've gone two minutes," said Uncle George reflectively; "that will put us with the right of way at the start. The trouble is," he went on, "everybody else seems to be doing the same thing. There is another way and by jiminy! I'll try it. Ready about! Lee-oh!"

Down went the helm. *Rag Doll* swung round, coming upright as her bows crossed the direction of the wind, and then lying down as her sails filled on the other tack.

"Four minutes!" called Mary, while Mark and Sidney sweated on the sheet-winch to get the foresail home. Now, *Rag Doll* was skimming along the starting line straight towards the shore which seemed to be coming towards her very fast. It looked as if Uncle George had hopelessly misjudged his position, and that in order to save his yacht from running ashore he would be forced to go about and cross the line before the starting gun was fired. If he had to do this he would be obliged to return and recross the line after the others had gone, and lose valuable time in doing so; but Uncle had the situation weighed up. Suddenly he roared "Stand by to Gybe!" and put his tiller hard "up." *Rag Doll* fought against her rudder, but after a short period of doubt she swung away from the wind. There was a desperate moment as every yacht in the race seemed to be coming straight for her; then "Gybe-oh!" called Uncle and the boom came over with a rattling crash. As this happened *Rag Doll* sprang to life; her bows flew into the wind and she started to sail towards the line close-hauled on the *port* tack. If you look at the picture* you can see what a risk Uncle George was taking. He had to rely on being able to cross the line at the start clear of any boats coming up to it on the other tack. If they were obliged to alter course to avoid hitting *Rag Doll* she would be out of the race at once, disqualified for failing to give way to a vessel on the starboard tack. It was a big risk to take for the sake of gaining the lead at the start, but races are won by taking risks.

"Two minutes!" shouted Mary. They watched with hearts beating as *Rag Doll* began to travel at speed towards the line. Sidney nodded grimly; she would be over before the gun; and if she wasn't, what about that there *Bluebell* coming up on the other tack? He looked

warningly at Uncle George, who nodded back to indicate that he could see everything, and knew what to do about it.

It *was* going to be a very close thing indeed. Their mouths grew dry with the agony of uncertainty. Uncle George looked grimmer and grimmer. "Stand by to ease your main sheet," he whispered. They watched with bated breath the rapidly approaching bows of *Bluebell* who was closely followed by half a dozen other competitors. "Ease your main sheet!" called Uncle, "and a little on your fore!" He put his tiller up and turned *Rag Doll* towards her rival. *Bluebell* passed not more than a foot across *Rag Doll's* bows, and as she did so Uncle called "Ready about!" and sent her flying round on *Bluebell's* weather quarter.

Now the boats were heading on the starboard tack for the shallow water at full speed, *Bluebell* slightly leading, then *Rag Doll*, and then a confused jumble of several yachts.

"Thirty seconds!" called Mary. Uncle looked round him and smiled; he would be all right and ahead of the whole fleet, except for *Bluebell* and that was not the only good thing about her position. In a few seconds *Bluebell* would reach a point near the shore where shallow water would force her to go about on to the port tack and when she did this she would according to the rules be allowed to call "Water!" and put about, and all other boats must allow her to do so, even if they were on the starboard tack. This was the position that Uncle George had aimed for; so had Podsnap of *Bluebell* and he was slightly in the better one. Never mind, the pair of them would be free to cross the bows of all the other competitors and have a clear wind, for the first and all-important few "legs" of the long beat to windward.

"Five—four—three—two—one." Bang! The roar of the gun, which was only a few yards away, nearly drowned Podsnap's frantic cry of "Water!" Uncle George just heard it, raised his arm to show that he was acting on it,

and turning to his nearest competitor yelled a stentorian "Water!" Over went the helm; *Rag Doll* plunged round into a steep breaking sea and hung for a moment "in stays" as *Bluebell* came close down on her weather. For a moment it looked as if the two boats would foul each other, then *Rag Doll*'s foresail felt the wind again, she heeled and was away; close astern of them many yachts were converging, almost touching each other, their skippers calling for "Water!" and "Starboard!" with great unanimity of purpose. Only *Bluebell* and *Rag Doll* had got away on the port tack as the gun went, and of these two *Bluebell* held the commanding position. "Blood for Breakfast!"—Podsnap had said—and he had meant it!

The race now developed in classic style. Podsnap of *Bluebell* with half a length's lead, which enabled him to "cover" *Rag Doll* on the port tack, and to hold what is called a "Lee-bow" position on the starboard, clung with grim intensity to his advantage and as long as he did, since both boats' speeds were practically identical, the initiative must remain with him. All he had to do was to maintain his position, covering his opponent, and it would be impossible for *Rag Doll* to beat him. But these were early moments in a race which would probably take over four hours, and Uncle George was not unduly worried. "The point is," he said, "that we are clear of the mob, and even with that perishing character Podsnap sitting on our weather we're better off than all those other chaps sailing in a thoroughly 'dirty' wind." They could see what he meant. The effect of so many masts and sails, close together, was to deflect and break up the smooth impact of the fresh breeze which was blowing, and that meant that *Rag Doll* and *Bluebell* would sail faster than those caught in each other's eddies.

On they sailed, out into the strength of the tide, while the other boats industriously tacked and cross-tacked close inshore. If Uncle, or Sidney for that matter (for he knew all about yacht-racing tactics), had been a free agent he would have gone about earlier and have headed

into Gurnard Bay where the tidal stream was not so fierce, but as we have said he was powerless in Podsnap's grip.

"Reckon 'e reckons 'e's got us where 'e wants us," said Sidney. "If 'e's not careful 'e'll throw away that nice lead he got at the start. The tide's setting us back."

"That's the trouble with Podsnap," growled Uncle George; "he'd rather beat us than anything and while he's making sure of that he'll let the others through."

"I always said he was a toad," muttered Binnie. "Isn't there anything we can do?"

"He can ride us to Kingdom Come if he wants to," said Uncle, "but he won't. What he will do will be to go about very quickly when we're least expecting it and try and get clear ahead of us. So watch him like a cat, Binnie, and if you see anybody's hand moving stealthily to the sheets you'll know he's going to tack."

"I'll help you to watch," said Ben.

They peered through the dog-house window while Uncle concentrated on getting *Rag Doll* along, nursing her through the puffs and beating up to windward until the two boats were nearly touching. "'E'll 'ave to go soon," said Sidney; "nice work, Commander. Look at the luff of her mainsail; it's all of a quiver!"

There was no doubt that Podsnap of *Bluebell* was being forced to "pinch" his craft (i.e. sail a little too near the wind). He cast a covetous glance at *Rag Doll*'s sail, saw that it was drawing perfectly and bowed to the inevitable. Binnie saw his lips move and the hands of the crew in the cockpit gliding out to grasp the fore-sheets and runner-levers. "Stand by, Uncle," she whispered.

"O.K.!" said Uncle. "Watch Podsnap on the tiller, and when he puts it 'down' say 'Now' and we'll do the same."

Uncle and Sidney had already got their sheets in hand, and waited for what seemed hours for Binnie's signal. Suddenly it came. "Now!" she squealed. "Lee-oh!" called Uncle, and everything happened at once. The

two identical boats spun on their keels, and went off on the other tack. Neither side had gained an inch on the turn, but next time it would be *Rag Doll*'s chance to slip away from her opponent.

As they charged towards the shallower water of Gurnard Bay they saw that their "private" battle with *Bluebell* had already cost them dearly.

Two yachts were right inshore, making short tacks in the almost tideless water, and they were gaining a considerable lead. The others were spread all around them; two had given up and had retired with split sails and half a dozen were already more than a quarter of a mile astern. Such a fierce beat to windward soon shook out the inefficient. And it *was* fierce. Spray was lashing the faces of everybody in the cockpit; ropes were hard, wet and slippery to the touch, and the strain on the foresheets was terrific. They grunted on the sheet-winch as if in protest. Sidney looked at them and said: "Good job you got new hemp there, sir—she's pulling like a 'orse."

Uncle George agreed. "False economy," he said, "but people will do it and then, in the middle of a hard blow, just when things are a bit dicky, Bing! go the sheets and Bang! goes your foresail. If that thing parts today we'll be lucky if we get the jib down before it flogs itself to bits."

At that moment *Bluebell*'s foresheets parted with the noise of a gun. Her jib flew out madly, whipping and thrashing the weather sheet, and flapping like an angry bird. Immediately *Bluebell* lost speed and *Rag Doll* was up and past her in a trice. "Block your ears, my little dears," sang Uncle George blithely, as the sound of strong language came faintly from leeward; "Mr. Podsnap is highly displeased!" The Greens were delighted to have gained this advantage, though secretly they would have preferred not to have scored off the other's misfortune, and Uncle George soon applied a corrective. "Don't start rejoicing yet awhile," he said, "we haven't begun yet."

As they neared the shore Sidney sought for and found the lead-line and got it ready for sounding. "I know this bit o' water like the back of me 'and," he said. "If you want to beat the tide you'll 'ave to take short tacks close inshore, like what those others are doing."

It's always a dangerous thing to state openly that you know something perfectly, and especially so when that something is the bottom of the sea. The back of Sidney's hand had no secrets, but Gurnard Bay and the coast running towards Newtown was not so simple. Uncle George, intent on sailing his craft to her very best advantage, decided to rely on Sidney's local knowledge *plus* the use of the lead-line, but as the shore came closer and closer he began to fidget. Sidney, without instructions, was sounding, a difficult and very wet operation.

"Plenty o' water, sir," he called.

"What do you mean by plenty?" asked Uncle George.

"Two fathoms, sir!"

"Call that plenty?" growled Uncle. "Go on sounding!" Sidney hove the lead again.

"Plenty o' water, sir!" he called.

"How much?"

"Just under two!"

"Ready about!" roared Uncle George.

Sidney cast a reproachful look as if to say, "You'll never win races unless you take risks." *Rag Doll* spun round, gained speed on the other tack and sped away leaving the shore behind her, and as she did so *Bluebell* passed three lengths under her stern. "Three lengths isn't much," said Uncle; "see what I mean? Onc mistake on our part and he'll be up with us."

A few minutes later it was time to put about and sail close inshore again. Once more Sidney took soundings, and kept telling Uncle he knew there was plenty of water, and once more Uncle used his own judgment. *Bluebell* was working up inshore with them, and now they were crossing each other's tacks; it was nothing but "Ready about! Get another fraction on the foresheet! Take a

sounding! Lee-oh! and there's plenty of water—sir." It was hard work!

Gradually they crept up along the coast until they could see Hamstead Ledge mark with their naked eyes, but it would be many more tacks before they would dare to put out into the swirling tide which was running in the deeper water. Then came their first check; just as Sidney said "There's plenty of water" and Uncle had automatically replied "Ready about!" there was an angry grating noise under the keel. *Rag Doll* shivered, jumped, bumped on something hard and swung round, coming to rest with her bows pointing to seaward. Sidney didn't help matters at that moment by telling Uncle George that *Rag Doll* was ashore; nor did it help matters to see *Bluebell*, shying like a frightened horse, pulling away for deeper water for all she was worth.

"Everybody over to leeward!" ordered Uncle. "Haul on the main sheet, get the sail flat aft! Come on! Time's precious!" They piled over to starboard and as they did so *Rag Doll* heeled a little more, an extra puff on her flattened sail put her over further, and then the grating noise began again. "She's comin' off, sir!" said Sidney, and she was! A moment later they were once more sailing merrily to windward but alas! *Bluebell* was now level with them. "One fault each," said Uncle; "that's how it goes." He looked fiercely at Sidney. "And don't say there's lots of water when there isn't," he grinned. "Strikes me you don't know the back of your hand as well as you thought you did."

"Vessel on the starboard tack coming three points on the starboard bow!" called Mark. It was *Skylark*, a boat they hadn't met before, sailed entirely by girls with an elderly lady at the tiller. "Blimey," said Sidney; "what-ever next? And she's ahead of us!"

So it went on. Backwards and forwards. Sometimes crossing ahead of their rivals, sometimes being crossed; wet through by the warm spray which constantly lashed them, wet yet again by a thunderous downpour, hungry

already as the result of excitement and hard work and desperately anxious to beat *Bluebell*. And all the time Uncle was warning them: "There's a long way to go; so save yourselves all you can."

As they neared the first mark they could see that they were very well placed. There were now four or five boats ahead of them but all of them were larger vessels and therefore would have to "give" time on the Handicap System to *Rag Doll*. Behind them, perilously close, was little *Venture*,* sailed as usual by the Tiger and going like a bomb. Now *Venture* was a low-handicap boat; that meant that *Rag Doll* must finish a good quarter of an hour ahead of her to "save her time." At present *Venture* was clearly the leading boat. And *Bluebell*? Neck and neck. "Cor!" said Sidney. "This is something like a race!"

"As soon as we're round the buoy it will be spinnaker to Port," said Uncle. Mary dived below and assisted by Binnie and Ben got the spinnaker on deck, by way of the dog-house and cockpit; then Sidney and Mark took it forward and started preparing it for hoisting, while Binnie, Ben and Mary took their places in the cockpit. The weight of the two people on the bows of *Rag Doll* caused the spray to come aboard almost continually, and soon Mark and Sidney were completely drenched; but they worked with a will and seemed very pleased with themselves when they came aft dripping with water and reported "Ready for hoisting!"

Rounding a buoy in a tideway requires perfect judgment. To put across too early, so that the tide sweeps the vessel the wrong side of the mark is a disastrous happening, and can cost many precious minutes. To "over-stand," however (that is to go too far up-tide), is also to waste precious time. There is only one way to do it and that is the perfect way, if the race is to be won—but what a worry!

Uncle George, with his years of sea-going, had an advantage over most of his rivals. He had the practised eye of a

* *Green Sailors on Holiday.*

seaman, he was used to gauging wind and tidal conditions, and he could tell at a glance whether he had allowed enough distance up-tide to counterbalance the full force of the stream. This time he made no mistake. Just at the right moment he put about for the mark and as he did so Podsnap of *Bluebell*, a few yards astern and to windward, followed suit. Podsnap knew Uncle George's reputation and was not ashamed to copy his tactics. Now the two craft, heeled over to the maximum, were speeding towards the great conical buoy whose white lettering grew larger and larger as they approached it. Three leading boats were already round and were rushing away with wind and tide behind them with their crews furiously battling with their spinnakers.

"As we round the buoy," said Uncle, "it's 'ease your sheets and then up spinnaker!' Got it?"

They nodded to show they understood. Another boat, *Venture* it was, was making for the buoy a yard to leeward of them. The noise of the three bow-waves—"scrunch—scrunch—scrunch!" got louder and louder. Now they could see the strong tide swirling round the buoy as it strained at its moorings. One false movement of the tiller and there would be a very nasty collision.

Steadily they came up on the mark until they could have touched it; yet so fast was *Rag Doll* travelling that her stern just missed it as Uncle George put his helm hard over. "Ease your sheets!" he called. "Up Spinnaker!"

As they turned away and began to run before the wind it seemed as if it had almost ceased to blow and to their intense surprise the task of getting the spinnaker up was easy. Soon *Rag Doll* was careering along—spinnaker bulging like half a gigantic water-melon—a great white frothy wake streaming out astern; abreast her, on either side, were *Venture* to starboard, and *Bluebell* to port! Something like a race!

For the first time since they had left their moorings the crew of *Rag Doll* had time to think of themselves. They were all wet through, except Binnie and Ben, and they

now removed the top layers of their sodden garments as a watery sun came out and warmed the atmosphere. Then, while Uncle and Sidney smoked, the Greens munched bars of chocolate and felt greatly refreshed thereby. Progress now was very rapid. They were roaring along at a speed of something approaching ten knots and Calshot Light Float was already in sight. Plans were being discussed for the most efficient way of rounding that next mark. It was going to be a tricky one, involving "Down Spinnaker!" and "Gybe-oh!" and just as Sidney and Mark had agreed on the best way of handling it the second of their minor disasters took place. Without any warning a sudden veer of the wind caused the spinnaker to ruffle badly. Mary rushed to the cleat on which the after-guy was secured and eased the boom forward so that the wind would fill the sail from aft, instead of ruffling it as at present. As she did so a heavy squall struck the ship; up went the spinnaker boom jerking violently at the fore- (or preventer) guy which snapped like a rotten twig. The boom flew up into the air and the billowing spinnaker flogged violently.

Uncle George put his helm over to bring the wind right aft, while Sidney and Mark hurled themselves on to the boom to haul it down again; but quick as they were they were too late. The spinnaker had wrapped itself round the fore-stay and wouldn't come clear.

Sidney went up the mast like a monkey, wrestled violently with the tangled mess and then shouted: "All yours!"

Mark hauled on the boom which came down with a run. The wind got into the sail which billowed out nicely, as if nothing had happened. While Sidney shinned down from aloft Mark improvised a new fore-guy, and in a few moments Uncle was free to alter course back to the direction in which he had wanted to go. It was then that they were all able to see what they had lost by this mishap. *Bluebell* and *Venture* were well ahead and going hard; some of the other boats were now close astern of

Rag Doll. The race was entering into a new phase; it was going to be desperately hard to maintain what little lead they now had.

Then, suddenly, *Bluebell* was in trouble with her spinnaker, and had to luff violently in order to put things right. In a moment, *Rag Doll* was up with her, but *Venture* still led and must be the winner, unless——?

Podsnap of *Bluebell* was giving his crew the benefit of his clacking tongue. They could hear him calling his long-haired louts some pretty hard names. Did they want to be beaten, yet again, by a parcel of kids? he inquired. Sheer inattention, he said; it really wasn't worth while racing if his crew was going to let him down so easily. Back to the Serpentine, he said; the next time he went sailing he'd get his crew from St. Trinians, and so on, and so on.

The Greens grinned wickedly; Sidney nodded to himself. "Missed his proper vocation, that geyzer," he said. "He oughter 'ave bin a Sergeant-Major!"

Rag Doll was now riding up close on *Bluebell's* weather quarter.

"Take care 'e don't luff you, sir!" Sidney's warning came too late. As he spoke *Bluebell* turned suddenly towards the wind and straight across *Rag Doll's* bows. Uncle George averted collision by a similar alteration, the spinnaker boom was quickly eased forward and the two yachts careered madly at right angles to their proper courses. Of course *Bluebell* was perfectly entitled to luff in this way to prevent herself being overtaken by a vessel from the windward side. It was a very effective manœuvre which succeeded as far as *Rag Doll* was concerned, but while this "private" luffing-match was going on, *Venture* sped on her way unmolested, and the other boats gained ground.

"Typical of the toad!" said Mark, gloomily. "If he can't win he's not going to let us have a chance!" That expressed all their sentiments, but as long as Podsnap of *Bluebell* wanted to he could run the pair of boats up to

windward and *Rag Doll* would be powerless to do anything about it.

You could almost hear Uncle George grinding his teeth, and if Podsnap hadn't at that moment relented and altered course for the light vessel there's no knowing what might not have happened.

Now the fleet was converging on the Calshot Light Float, coming to the same point from a wide arc. All of them would have to gybe round and it was clear that there were going to be some tense and exciting moments as the late-comers jostled those whose speed was reduced by the necessity of taking their spinnakers down before gybing. It needed a good nerve, good judgment and perfect knowledge of the rules of racing without which a false move would end in a protest and ultimate disqualification. Podsnap had a remarkable grasp of the finer points of the rules and would argue the after-fin off a seahorse given the chance to do so. Uncle George, on the other hand, didn't want to get involved in the inevitable disputes which would arise as the main body of boats rounded the mark. And so he took the corner very wide, and was immediately rewarded by the sound of voices raised in anger and some ominous bumping noises. To do this, however, he had sacrificed the "weather gauge," the main body was now to windward and was taking much of his wind, but *Rag Doll* continued to hold her own; there was peace and goodwill aboard and nobody was exhausted. *Bluebell*, on the other hand, was in a jittery state; Podsnap was exchanging uncomplimentary remarks with all and sundry and his shrouds were decorated with dusters, which indicated that he intended to enter an official protest as soon as the race was finished.

Meanwhile *Venture*, coolly sailed by the Tiger, was ahead of the main body and in an almost unbeatable position.

The gybe and "Down Spinnaker" round the mark had been very successful in *Rag Doll*, and when it had been accomplished the spinnaker was hoisted on the other

side. Then more chocolate was consumed, while they waited for the next burst of activity which would occur as they rounded the buoy off Ryde Pier, and headed up for the finishing line on their first time round. Now, the weather was improving overhead, the clouds were breaking, but the wind showed little signs of taking off. It was, said Sidney, going to be a hard bash all the way round.

There was another *mêlée* at the next mark, and again Uncle George kept clear of it. Once round it and lying down to the strong breeze *Rag Doll* demonstrated her superiority to windward in an ugly lop, and steadily pulled up on her rivals.

By the time the starting line was crossed on the completion of the first circuit, *Rag Doll* and *Bluebell* were the leading boats with little *Venture* falling back as the effect of the rough water was felt. The tide was now turning, and with it in opposition to the wind, the whole of the surface of the Solent was covered with white-capped waves. The motion was incredibly violent and heavy seas fell aboard *Rag Doll*, but the encouraging thing was the speed with which the tide helped the yacht to windward. In less than half the previous time taken to reach Hamstead Ledge the western mark buoy was reached and rounded, *Venture* first, *Rag Doll* a little astern, and just behind, *Bluebell*, with several other boats in a confused jumble. Once more the spinnakers were hoisted, and this time *Rag Doll* rolled heavily with the wind behind her, but nothing went wrong and it looked as if she might very well beat her rival. But that was before the sudden arrival of the *Queen Mary*!

Their attention was first drawn to the coming of the gigantic liner by the unmistakable sound of her fog-horn. Then her bows appeared beyond Calshot Castle and then the whole vessel hove into sight and suddenly dwarfed everything else afloat. Even the heights of the Isle of Wight looked low-lying, and as for the yachts, they suddenly became midget size!

Sidney looked at her for a while, and said: "Shouldn't care to be the skipper o' that little lot; not going round those corners, I wouldn't. Tricky business, I'd say. Wouldn't you, sir?"

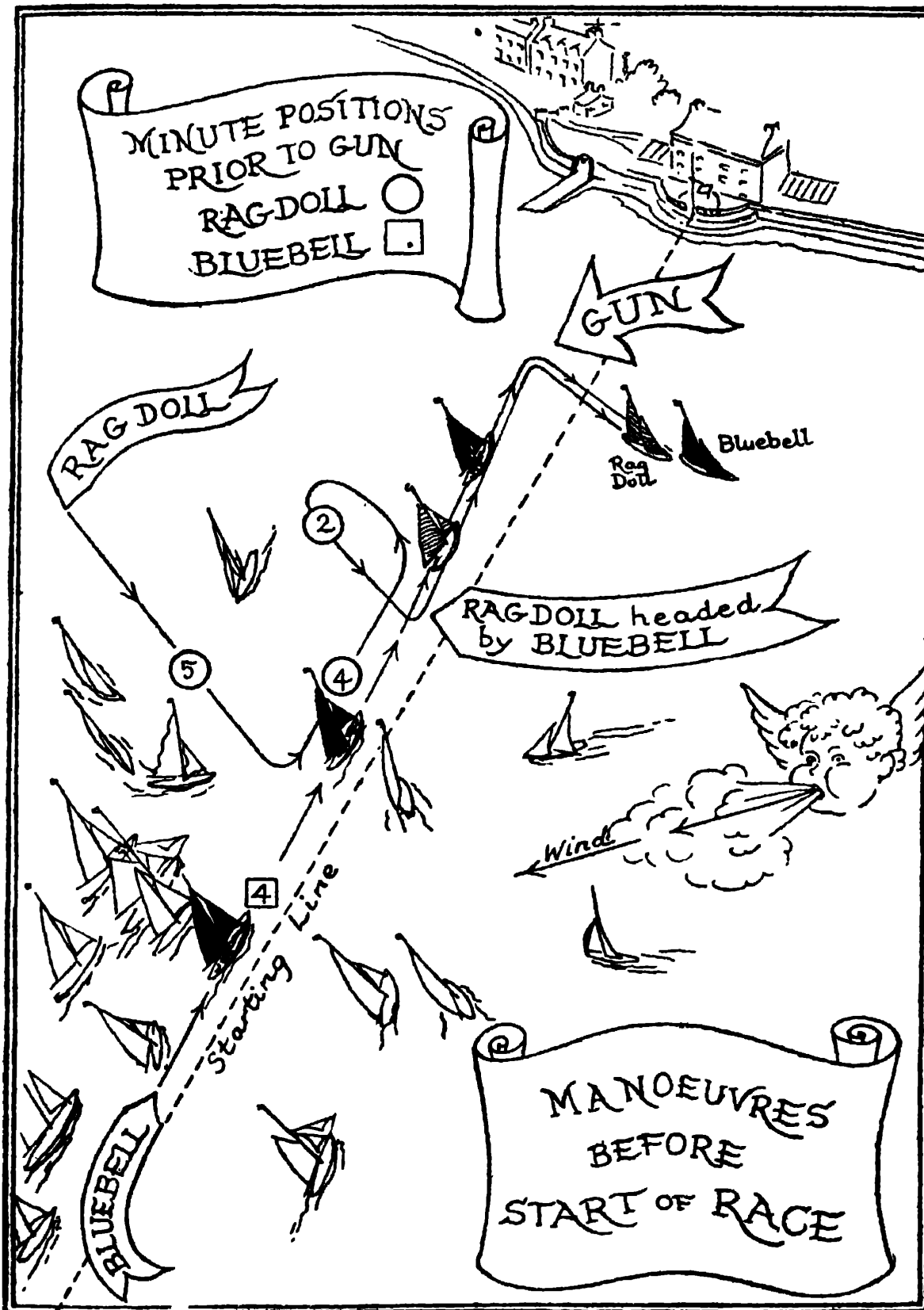
"You're right," said Uncle George. "She's in a tough spot in that dredged channel, with only a few hundred feet to spare on either side. With this wind blowing she's got to keep going or she'd be aground in a jiffy." He looked at the great ship, at *Bluebell*, and then at little *Venture* and sized up the situation. "We're all right," he said eventually; "we'll pass under her stern, but *Venture* will just about hit her off if she don't do something about it."

Five minutes later Uncle George's predictions began to work out. *Rag Doll* and *Bluebell* both eased themselves into shallow water where they couldn't possibly get in the way of the liner, but the Tiger continued to head straight for the same spot for which the *Queen Mary* was making, and nobody aboard *Venture* seemed to be taking any notice of the existence of some seventy thousand tons of ship, coming towards her with deceptive slowness.

"When I was a small boy," said Uncle George, "I ganged up with a lot of other boys in the village, and we used to footle around in a field, where there was an unwatched level crossing. Somebody invented an exciting game; it was called 'Last Across,' and we played it by running across the train line when an engine was coming. The last boy to cross before the engine arrived was the winner. It looks to me as if *Venture* is playing 'last across.' D'you know, this may sound ridiculous, but I doubt very much if the Tiger has *seen* the *Queen Mary*. He concentrates so much on getting the boat along, and he's so hard on his crew that not one of them would dare to speak to him during the race."

"Will he get across?" asked Mary.

"It's going to be a near thing," said Uncle. "I hope he's not going to be like the chap in the last game we ever played of 'Last Across.'"



"Was he killed?" asked Binnie.

"He ought to have been," said Uncle; "but he wasn't. The engine's buffer caught him a crack on the shoulder and sent him flying. He spent six months in hospital and we didn't play 'Last Across' any more."

"Isn't there anything we can do?" Mary had visions of disaster. An uneasy feeling that they were about to witness a nasty accident passed through all their minds.

"Surely," said Mark, "he knows what he's doing!"

"He's runnin' it a sight too fine!" said Sidney unhappily. "What's he think he's up to? The *Q.M.* can't stop under 'alf a mile; nor can she alter course. He's asking for it!"

It really looked terrifying now. The little *Venture* seemed to shrink before their very eyes as the gigantic hull of the liner approached her. Now the big ship's Captain was beginning to worry. Four imperious blasts on her siren awoke the echoes and sent flocks of gulls screaming in all directions. But still *Venture* held on, and the crew of *Rag Doll* gripped the nearest piece of boat in an agony of apprehension.

"She's for it!" said Sidney. "Look at 'er, sir! Look! She's right under the bows!"

They watched with bated breath, while Uncle George repeated his three words of Swahili as if he was saying a prayer. "The infernal cuckoo," he said; "this is carrying keenness too far!"

Now the great bows of the *Queen Mary* seemed to be about to slice *Venture* in half. They waited for a splintering crash and the collapse of the little vessel, and perhaps to hear the tortured scream of a human being in pain, but then a miracle seemed to happen—*Venture* slid across the liner's bow and disappeared from view behind her!

"Phew!" Uncle George mopped his face, and so did Sidney his.

"I bet the Skipper of the *Q.M.* 'as got somefing to say about *Venture*," he said.

"What do you think he's saying?" asked Ben.

"Something like 'Bless their hearts!' Mr. Ben," said Sidney gravely.

"I don't call that much," said Ben.

Further speculation on what the Captain of the *Queen Mary* might have been saying about *Venture* was cut short by the arrival of the first of her bow-waves which came like a great ocean swell, and was followed by a succession of smaller ones. Then the effect of the liner's bulk made itself felt as the wind started to do peculiar things; first dying to a light breeze, and then backing four points, with a sudden squall, before veering and resuming its normal direction and force. During this time they were all fully occupied trimming the sails; then came the stern-waves and they had to hang on for dear life as *Rag Doll* pitched and rolled and fought her rudder as she passed through the swirling water close astern of the liner which was now under full helm, and turning rapidly to her new course to Spithead, the open sea, and America.

Eagerly they scanned the liner's port side for signs of *Venture*, and for one sickening moment they could see nothing. Then Sidney spotted something. It wasn't the beautiful Bermuda mainsail, complete with a billowing spinnaker, that they had last seen; it was a floating hulk, enveloped in canvas, with a yellow spar bobbing alongside it, and with its crew struggling to free themselves from the awful tangle around them. *Venture* had paid for her temerity. A sudden squall, generated by the passage of the great liner had put too much strain on her light racing gear, and now she was a drifting wreck. Before Uncle George could give the order to "Down Spinnaker" and "Stand by to Rescue" he was forestalled by a motor-cruiser, who altered course and went towards the wrecked vessel.

"Good!" said Uncle, settling down to his team-work with renewed enthusiasm. "I don't want to be uncharitable but——"

"Serves them jolly well right," said Mark.

"That'll learn 'em," said Sidney; "now, sir; we've got to beat that there *Bluebell*!"

The two rivals sped towards the next mark, with *Rag Doll* about half a length ahead, and the rest of the fleet strung out astern. It was going to be a very close finish indeed, and a great deal depended upon the way in which they "took the corners." At Calshot Float a slight hang-up with the drill for getting the spinnaker down before the gybe resulted in Uncle George being obliged to overrun the mark while they sorted things out on the fo'c'sle. That put *Bluebell* ahead again, for it was some time before order could be restored, and the spinnaker was flying again on the other gybe. They heard Podsnap's cackle of glee across the water and registered yet again their conviction that the man was an absolute toad. Now everything seemed to be happening faster than ever—before they knew where they were it was "Down Spinnaker!" at the last mark, and ho! for the finishing line, with a fair tide and a head wind.

"Long tacks in the tide, across the Solent," said Uncle George, "is the correct thing to do, but unless *Bluebell* gets into trouble she ought to be certain of beating us now. All she has to do is 'cover' us and she'll get there first. Now let me think."

Uncle was thinking out loud, and they listened to him with hope once more springing in their breasts. Uncle wasn't losing without a struggle, for there were only a few lengths between the two boats. "One little slip on his part," went on Uncle, "and we'll have him."

"Tell you what, sir," said Sidney; "why don't you sail inshore and dodge round the boats at anchor in Cowes Roads? Anythink could 'appen there!"

Uncle nodded. "I agree," he said; "we shall give a bit away to the boats astern, but it can't be helped. Our only chance of beating *Bluebell* is to lead her into trouble. We've nothing to lose if we ourselves get mixed up with the boats at anchor, so let's go! Ready about!"

They sped towards the crowded anchorage and tacked up inshore, and sure enough *Bluebell* followed suit. Wherever they went she shadowed them, from ahead, and they couldn't gain a yard on her. As the anchorage was neared a great cloud of small sails appeared. "Scows, dinghies, and prams," said Uncle; "dozens of them; all running free now, but by the time we get there they'll have rounded their marks and be close-handed and making up-wind in the same direction as us. There's our only chance!" Straight for the mass of little craft he steered, while their faithful shadow was obliged to do the same. As they neared the crowded anchorage Uncle George sent Mark up forward to report the approach of the little boats; then, abjuring all of them to strict silence, he took his ship into the mêlée of craft of all sizes, some at anchor, some under sail, and racing, some out for the day, some even fishing. It needed a strong nerve and good judgment to sail between the yachts at anchor, for the fierce tide would not fail to get them into trouble if an error of judgment was committed. Up to windward—three lengths ahead, *Bluebell* was "breaking trail" like a Canadian trapper, with cries of expostulation and abuse floating from her cockpit. Francis Podsnap wasn't finding any pleasure in this mad caper. He kept looking over his shoulder at *Rag Doll* as if to complain that Uncle George's tactics were not fair.

Uncle grinned. "He's getting rattled," he whispered. They watched *Bluebell*, heading for a particularly difficult part of the anchorage where there were two large motor-cruisers on moorings, and half a dozen Flying Fifteens, which seemed to have suddenly materialised, like a new hatch of fairy-queens. For a moment Podsnap faltered, as if unable to face this new array of small craft; then his nerve went, and he put *Bluebell* about just where he shouldn't have, to find her heading for one of the motor-cruisers. He was obliged to alter course violently to pass to leeward of the anchored vessel, while *Rag Doll* went on her way rejoicing. Dinghies, and Flying Fifteens buzzed round

them like mosquitoes; indignant small-boat owners, aggrieved at having their wind taken by this comparative giant, abused them roundly, but still they went on until Uncle George judged that he could "make" the finishing line in the next tack.

"Ready About!" he called, and then with a stentorian "Lee-oh!" jammed the tiller down. *Rag Doll* spun round, cleared the boat ahead at anchor by a couple of feet, and lay down to the wind in the port tack, heading for the line for the finish of the most exciting race you could imagine.

And where, now, was *Bluebell*?

"There she is!" said Binnie.

Sidney said something rude under his breath; and out loud he said: "We've 'ad it, sir!" He was right. *Bluebell* was on the starboard tack heading for the same point as *Rag Doll* on the port tack. They would meet just short of the finish, and *Rag Doll* would have to give way. If, however, she went about at this very moment, she would still lose half a length in that operation. Nothing now could save *Rag Doll* from defeat—nothing but another miracle! Then the miracle arrived. The Jurgen Twins, in their little craft came snooping down the line, straight across *Bluebell's* bows. Francis Podsnap, yelling blue murder, saw that unless he did something drastic he would cut the Jurgen's boat in half. For a moment he hesitated, for it would be their fault entirely if he did hit them. But even a toad like Podsnap of *Bluebell* was not prepared to go to the limit of insisting on his right of way and, therefore, risking life and limb. He put away and told the Jurgen Twins exactly what he thought of them, what he would like to do to them, and what their end would most certainly be. While he did this *Bluebell* passed two feet under *Rag Doll's* stern, and Uncle George gave the Jurgens a double salvo of sound advice as they skidded down *Rag Doll's* starboard side with inches to spare.

Bang went a gun and two seconds later another bang! *Rag Doll* had won.

"Bad luck," shouted the Greens to their grinning rivals in *Bluebell*. Podsnap was still chattering with rage but he pulled himself together and gave a sickly grin.

"All I can say is we was very lucky," said Sidney.

Chapter Fourteen

WHAT IS MR. PAGGOTT UP TO?

SOMEBODY once said that the best part of yacht-racing in bad weather is when you leave off! Certainly this was true for the Green Sailors, for they had won this race outright and were very pleased with themselves indeed. Half an hour after the finish *Rag Doll* was once more secured on the "trot"; and this time *Bluebell* was outside her, with half a dozen more yachts outside her again; and then the nattering began. Uncle George, Podsnap and Sidney had a drink together while the Greens and the long-haired louts discussed every aspect of the race. Podsnap of *Bluebell* had quite recovered his temper by now, and took comfort in having scored a *moral* victory over *Rag Doll*, and both boats openly gloried at having beaten the pick of the handicap class in hard weather.

"This was our day," said Uncle, happily. "The other boats will come into their own when the fine weather comes."

"What about our Nylon spinnaker?" said Mary.

"Aha!" said Podsnap of *Bluebell*. "So that's the surprise, is it?"

Then the conversation became very technical and Mary began to make rattling noises in the galley, for it was mid-afternoon and so far they'd only had chocolate. It wasn't until they'd finished eating a meal which began as lunch and finished as tea that they realised how tired they felt from the effects of the buffeting of wind and water. After helping Mary to wash up they all stretched out on their bunks for one hour, and then, quite miraculously, they felt as fresh as paint.

Now came the next part of the day's programme. They scraped the caked salt off their faces, put on slightly more respectable, and certainly drier clothes, and piled into the dinghy to go ashore for the purpose of meeting their friends and hearing about the other races in that regatta. Sidney watched them go, beaming happily when Uncle George told him that they couldn't have managed without him, and returned to *Camellia* for what he called "a nice lay-down."

When the dinghy reached the shore and was secured safely, they all went to one of the Yacht Clubs and stood on the balcony drinking ginger beer and looking at the wonderful sight of hundreds of yachts all moored-up for the night after a hard day's racing. It was a beautiful evening; the wind had taken-off and the sky was clearing. Tomorrow would be a fine sunny day. After a hearty natter with all sorts of people they went to a restaurant and had a meal, for Uncle George said that you couldn't expect Mary to race all day and cook all night. The food wasn't very good and the service was terrible. It took what seemed hours to pass from a course of "Brown Windsor Soup" to Fried Fillet of Plaice, to Cold Ham and Salad; thence to Vanilla Ice-Cream, and by the time they had been served and had reached the last course it was dark and they felt sleepy.

So they strolled back to their dinghy and Uncle paddled it back to the trot on water which had become smooth and black and mysterious, with splashes of golden light which were made by the reflections of myriads of yachts' riding-lights.

It was quiet now, and they were all tired and ready for bed. So they kept mousy-quiet as they hauled their dinghy under the warps of the outside yachts and reached *Rag Doll*. Just as Mark was about to grasp the yacht's gunwale, a warp grazed his face and he gave an involuntary ouch! The effect of his sudden exclamation was surprising. A dark figure, which must have been crouched in the cockpit, rose suddenly, climbed on to the upper

deck and ran forward. They could see that whoever it was was clad only in bathing-trunks, and carried nothing with him as he jumped off *Rag Doll*'s bow into the water and swam hastily away. The Greens and Uncle George were hopelessly handicapped in the crowded little dinghy for having anything to do with a chase, and by the time even Mark had got aboard, the swimmer had disappeared. Then the voice of Podsnap of *Bluebell* came out of the darkness. "Your friend didn't seem to want to see you," he called. "I asked him what he was doing aboard *Rag Doll* when I saw him just now in your cockpit and he said that he was an old friend of yours, and had come aboard to look for something he'd dropped on the last occasion of his visit."

"Did he say what it was?" asked Uncle George.

"A gold pencil," said Francis Podsnap.

"Mr. Paggott is losing his grip," said Uncle; "or perhaps he's got two gold pencils. Thanks, Podsnap; by the way, if at any other time you see our 'friend' aboard this vessel I'd be much obliged if you'd order him off."

"What's he up to?" asked Mr. Podsnap.

"That's what we'd all like to know," said Uncle George.

He went below and once again called "Stormcock." After a short conversation he hung up his receiver and said, "Bed! It's been a long day and we're racing again tomorrow."

To their own secret surprise the Greens turned in without having the energy to get excited about their unwelcome visitor—or even to speculate what it was that kept him buzzing round *Rag Doll* like a wasp round a jar of honey. A hard day's racing is a wonderful way of preventing a person from worrying. Nothing short of an earthquake would have prevented the Greens from falling asleep as soon as they were stretched out. Five minutes after Uncle George had snapped the electric light switch off they were all dead to the world, too tired even to dream.

Chapter Fifteen

LOOPY AGAIN!

AFTER that first day's hard racing, in which fortune had favoured them to the extent of causing their worst enemies unconsciously to snatch victory for *Rag Doll* from the egregious Mr. Podsnap, the weather had changed for the better. The winds, mostly light and variable, blew with a soft warm insistence, just ruffling the bluest of seas and making perfect conditions for the holiday-makers ashore.

For the racing people in general, and *Rag Doll*, a heavy boat, in particular, the wind was a shade on the light side for the strong tidal streams, and the races were frequently stopped after one round of the course had been completed. During those days the Green Sailors blessed the Nylon spinnaker, without which they could never have done as well as they did. Even so, the best they could achieve, without the help of Sidney, who, of course, was now helping his master to sail *Camellia* in insufficient wind, was a fourth place on one day only. The remainder of the days found them "in the running," but not "in the money." Nevertheless, they thoroughly enjoyed it, and by the end of the week they felt they'd been racing at Cowes all their lives.

On the Friday of Cowes Week, which was a very special day, they anchored in the Roads, after their race, and waited until dark for the fireworks. It was a wonderful display, with rockets, and whizz-bangs—enormous Catherine-wheels and a final set-piece, in which two ships fought each other until one of them blew up! Then, when the official fireworks were over, the yachts themselves began to give their own displays, with flares and rockets,

which they accompanied by the ringing of bells and the tooting of fog-horns. It was all great fun and went on very late, for, as far as most people were concerned Firework Night was the end of the Week, though racing would continue for local yachts at Cowes for several more days.

On the Saturday morning they all gathered in the cockpit to watch the start of the greatest ocean race to be held in home waters—the famous Fastnet Race, in which some fifty boats were competing. They waved furiously to their friendly enemy *Bluebell*, who was having-a-go and wished him luck. Then, when the starting gun had gone and the great fleet of Ocean Racers had disappeared round Egypt Point, Cowes seemed an empty place. The glory had departed and they all wished that *Rag Doll* too, was in the race. Uncle George was more silent than usual; he was sailing in spirit with the other racers, and wondering why he hadn't entered for it, though he knew that such a strenuous affair would have needed a far stronger crew than the Green family. The state of depression aboard *Rag Doll*, however, didn't last very long, for the weather seemed to be set fair, bathing was a regular routine and all the Greens were now as brown as berries. A little later the Club motor-boat came alongside and passed over the mail, milk and papers, and their minds were finally diverted from wishing they were racing round the Fastnet Rock by the sight of a bulky envelope with Loopy Lomas's unmistakable handwriting on it.

Mary opened the letter, which was addressed to her and read it out.

"Dear Mary, Mark, Binnie and Ben and with very respectful salutations to the Commander" [it began].

"How are you?"

"I've been doing a lot of hard thinking since last we met, and it hasn't been only thinking. I've been so busy, what with one thing and another that I haven't had time to write to you all and express my gratitude to you for all that you did last week round at what's-his-name's

yard. You see, Mr. Pingleton came to me after you'd all gone, and when that guy Macgreggor had gone too, and he told me that he'd found himself in a very difficult position. He had absolutely no idea, he said, that Macgreggor was a crook, and when he discovered it, thanks to you, Commander, he couldn't very well expose the man he'd known so long, so he decided to bluff it out, until the company was gone. Then, he hoofed Macgreggor, good and proper and told me to write and say how much he regretted the whole affair."

["I bet he does," muttered Uncle! "Go on."]

"And while I remember, there was a friend of yours, one Clarence Paggott, aboard us for a little while. Said he knew you well and asked the whale of a lot of questions about your future movements. I said, 'If you know them as well as that why don't you ask them yourself?' To tell the truth I didn't take very kindly to Clarence; he seemed to me a bit too smooth to be one of your friends (though if he is I ask your pardon for this, and it'll serve me right for sticking my neck out). Anyway he asked to be remembered to you when I wrote and said nicest possible things about you all—though I still think the guy's a bad lot."

["Loopy appears to be growing up," said Uncle George; "he's not quite such a fool as I thought he was—go on."]

"Well, now for my news. The next time you meet me you'll have to salute and call me Skipper! 'Cause why? 'Cause I've gone and bought me a boat. 'Yes, sir!

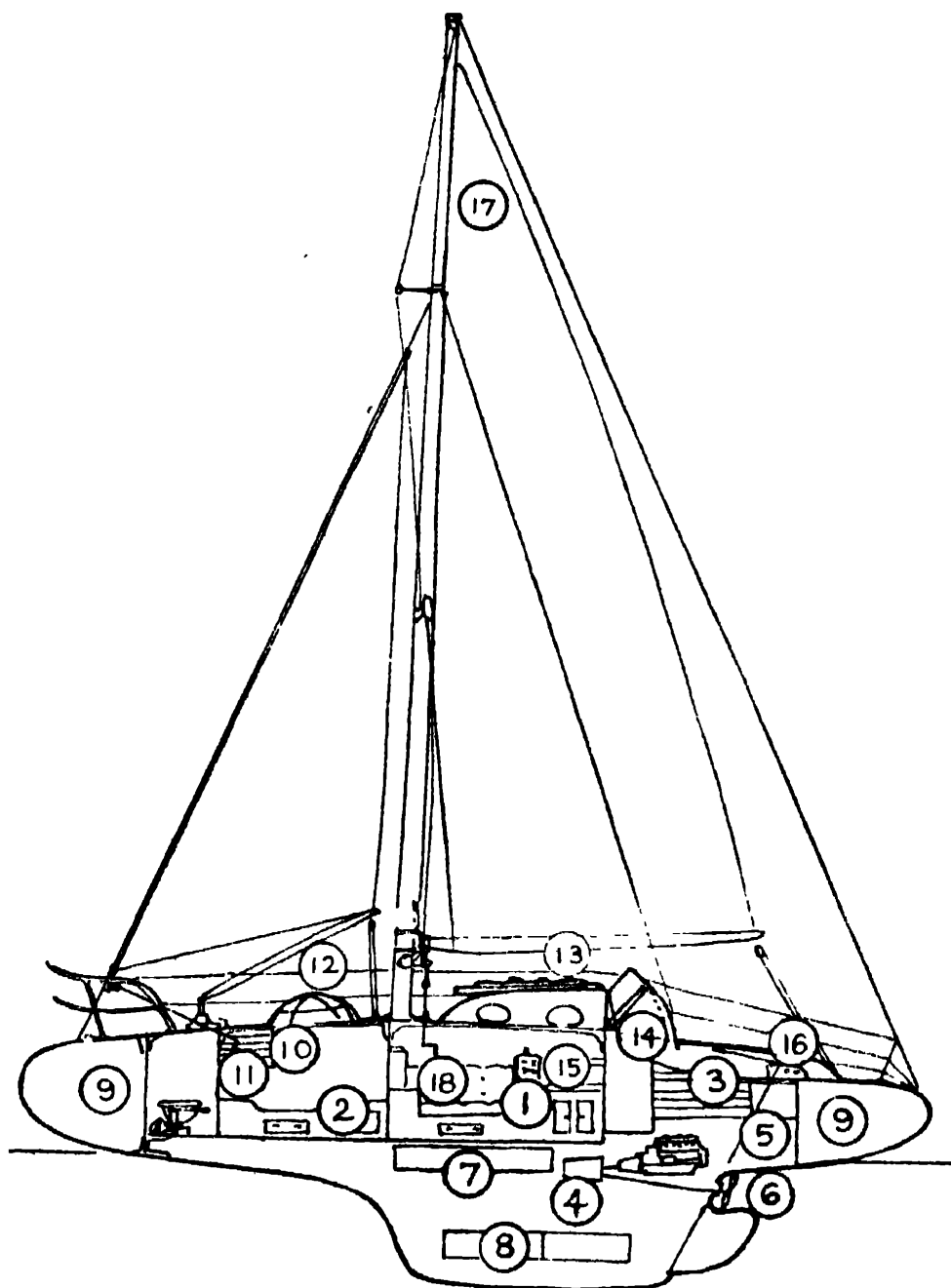
"I'm writing this letter in her saloon and every time I look around me I sort of croon with joy. And I owe it all to old Pingleton—not the money I mean, I've paid that—the chance to buy the most modern and up-to-date vessel in this country. She's called *Easter Egg*, but as your Shakespeare says: 'What's in a name?': what's more she does look something like an egg as she's rather an extreme case of what your yacht designers call 'Reverse Sheer.' That is, she's all humped in the middle and what

a difference it makes down below here! Why, if I wanted to take a grand piano with me there'd be room for it. And the gadgets in her! Boy! it's all press-button work. I can lie in my bunk and do it all without ever going on deck—hoist the sails, steer the boat, pump out the bilges, start the engine—all without getting on my feet. She's built of aluminium, she's as light as a feather, and, Pingleton says, just the job for my purpose. I always was lucky! How did I get her? Well, it seems the guy who had her built was by way of being a clever one—but he's been overworking lately, and needed a long rest. He had intended to sail *Easter Egg* round the world by himself, but his doctors have put the kibosh on that, and so he's had to sell her. Pingleton bought her for me and of course he's taken a rake-off, but I don't grudge him a penny. This is a honey of a boat—of course she's not so orthodox-looking as dear old *Rag Doll*”—[“Not so much of the *old*,” muttered Mark, “last time he said she was ‘newfangled’”]—“but I come from a progressive country, and I realise we've got to move with the times. *Easter Egg*, bless her, is the shape of things to come—a true product of the Atomic Age—in fact she's a lallapaloosa, if you know what that means?

“I'm off in her to get down to the West Country just as soon as I can get my stores aboard, and believe me it isn't only Baked Beans in yours truly's *Easter Egg*.

“She's fitted with Radio Telephone; boy! she's got everything! If I hurry, Pingleton says, I could get across The Pond before the Hurricane season opens, but that's a bit ambitious, and I'll probably mosey around and pick up a few wrinkles from people who know more about it than me. I'll be sailing from Mill Creek tomorrow on the first lap of what is going to be, I'm sure, the best thing I ever did in my life. So I'll close now and get ready for sea.

“With grateful thanks for past services rendered, and in the happy hope of seeing you all once more, and with good luck to you in your racing at Cowes, and special



- | | |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1. Saloon | 10. Forward cockpit |
| 2. Sleeping cabin | 11. Worm-drive foresail reefing |
| 3. Cockpit | 12. Astro dome look-out |
| 4. Vee-drive propeller shaft | 13. Rubber dinghy stowage |
| 5. Batteries | 14. Automatic hatch |
| 6. Variable-pitch propeller | 15. R/T set |
| 7. Water tanks | 16. Automatic helmsman |
| 8. Water ballast | 17. Reefing topmast, linked to— |
| 9. Water-tight compartment | 18. Worm gear mainsail reefing gear |

“ . . . In fact she’s a lallapaloosa ! ”

regards to Polly-the-Parrot, here is Loopy Lomas signing off.

“P.S. Watch out for that guy Paggott—even Pingleton’s frightened of him, and *he* takes a lot of scaring!

“Loopy.”

There was a long silence when Mary had finished reading; all eyes were turned on Uncle George for the official verdict. Would it be necessary to revive HOLS? Was Pingleton up to another of his tricks? Presently Uncle began to talk.

“*Easter Egg*, eh?” he said. “Now that’s an interesting craft. I’ve seen an article about her in the *Yachting Times*. Let’s have a look at it, Mary!”

Mary rummaged in a locker and presently they were all poring over a line drawing of the vessel that Loopy had already described.

“Interesting,” said Uncle; “unorthodox, but definitely interesting. I’d like to look at her.”

“But, Uncle,” said Mary; “is *Easter Egg* a suitable boat for Loopy?”

“I doubt if there is such a vessel,” said Uncle George; “but judging by her design and specification she is an exceptionally seaworthy boat, and is not likely to founder in a gale. Of course she’s very lightly built of thin aluminium sheeting, but that’s no cause for alarm, as long as the designers have heard about the little matter of electro-chemical action.”

He went on to explain that if a ship’s hull is *not* made of wood, great care must be taken to ensure that two dissimilar metals are not put close to each other. “Take, for example, an aluminium hull, such as *Easter Egg*’s, and then fit a keel made of iron to her, securing it with copper bolts. What you’ve done there is to make a couple of electric cells with the salt sea-water taking the place of the ordinary acid that you get in an accumulator such as motor-cars use. And so a little electric current will be passing from the aluminium hull to the iron keel and

also to the copper bolts and all the time this is happening the aluminium (unless it has been carefully treated) will be eaten away very slowly until one day it disappears altogether."

"Oh dear!" said Mary. "Poor Loopy!"

"But," concluded Uncle George, "there is a special note in the accompanying article which says that all that has been taken care of. So cheer up! As long as Loopy is on the high seas, however, I feel that he's more of a menace to us than other people are to him."

"Then we needn't go to his rescue?" said Mary.

"Heaven forbid," said Uncle George. "I know it's rash to prophesy, but I venture to say that whatever happens to that young man he will always come through smiling. So let's put him out of our minds, shall we? We've only got a week's holiday left, and I want to get down west. I'm fond of the West Country and I think we've all had our fill of whizzing round the racing marks. We'll catch the afternoon tide to Mill Creek, load up with food and take the following tide down the Needles Channels and Westward Ho! How's that?"

"What about Mr. Paggott?" asked Binnie.

"That," said Uncle George impressively, "is yet another reason for going west. I don't know what he's up to, but he spoils my peace of mind. Crooks are all very well in thrillers, or at the movies, but they're a perishing nuisance when you're on a holiday. So I'm going to play hide-and-seek and disappear from Mr. Paggott's ken. He's got too many friends in this part of the world who keep tabs on us. Down in Cornwall it will be different."

Uncle George was quite right, but not quite in the way he expected.

Chapter Sixteen

THINGS THAT GO BUMP! IN THE NIGHT

AFTER the vigorous discipline of handicap racing, where every operation must be carried out at top speed, all conversation must be cut to a minimum, and even the midday meal must be subordinated to the needs of the race, it was a blessed relief to be sailing without the worry of wondering why the other boats seemed to be getting along faster; moreover everything aboard *Rag Doll* seemed to be much easier to perform after such a succession of gruelling races. So everybody relaxed themselves. Polly-the-Parrot, who had been shamefully neglected by Ben, was now given her usual English lesson, Mary was brewing something pretty tasty in the galley, Binnie had got another *Biggles* well under way, and Mark and Uncle George had, as usual, taken over most of the deck duties between them, as they sailed happily on a broad reach down Channel, with a moderate sea-breeze to help them along.

They had called in at Mill Creek for stores, as arranged, and, after the bustle and crowds at Cowes, had found the little haven almost deserted by comparison. *Fallen Star* was there, but there was no visible sign of Mr. Pingleton, though smoke emerging from her old-fashioned stove-pipe indicated that she was inhabited.

Of Loopy there was also no sign, but ashore, in the little Clubhouse, there was a great deal of chatter about his new boat which had given the local gossips some much-needed grist for their conversational mills. He had come and gone, and bets were being made as to how far he would get in *Easter Egg* before disaster overtook him.

Rag Doll had lain that night at her moorings and the

Greens, rising early, had caught the first of the tide down Channel. Now they were reaping the benefit of the early start; Portland Bill lay miles to the northward, a long menacing shape, like some crouching beast; *Rag Doll* was well clear of the dreaded Race and would, by nightfall, have reached her first port of call, which was Brixham.

By just before six o'clock that evening *Rag Doll* was half-way across West Bay, and the dim outline of the Devon coast showed faintly in the heat haze. Uncle George, having inspected the barometer, and not liking the curious glazed appearance of the sinking sun, diagnosed a change and called down the hatch to Binnie to switch on the Weather Forecast. Binnie, bemused by hours of voracious reading, and still in spirit with her hero, who was having some difficulty with a couple of international spies, reached out her hand and turned the wrong switch. Immediately the saloon was full of strange voices, as the radio telephone belched out a jumble of conversations from adjacent fishing-boats.

"—about four 'undredweight of pilchards and you can't sell 'em for love nor money—" said a mournful Cornishman.

"Not that switch," came Uncle George's voice. Binnie twiddled a knob, and another man said: "Tell Jim Brady I'll meet him tomorrow evening for a game of darts." She twiddled again, and a Frenchman spoke as if he were inside the set itself. "*C'est terrible—pas des Pêches!*"

"Clot," came Mark's voice. "Not that one, you oaf!" Binnie, still bemused, and more than a little fascinated by her ability to indulge in the art of mass-eavesdropping, twiddled a little further. Snatches came: "Where there's squid, you don't get no lobsters!"—"Stick to the mackerel, Joe."—"Ave you 'eard them Portuguese is fishin' in Mounts Bay?" And then, suddenly, they all sat up. A voice said: "Say, if you guys would stop talking—I got something very important to say. This is *Easter Egg* calling all ships! Mayday! Mayday! S O S! My position is doubtful and I sure am thirsty—*Easter Egg*

calling——” The voice died away. Uncle George made a bound for the set, and did some concentrated twiddling on his own, but there was no further evidence of Loopy. While they listened with bated breath they heard many conversations, but no one was answering the call for help that had been sent out. After a bit of thought and a somewhat unsatisfactory cross-examination of Binnie as to what setting was on the tuning-dial when she had intercepted Loopy, Uncle selected a frequency and called him up.

“*Rag Doll calling Easter Egg! Rag Doll calling Easter Egg! Over!*”

Faintly at first, and then louder came the answer. “This is *Easter Egg* all right. Is that you, Commander? Over!”

“Yes,” said Uncle. “Where are you, Loopy?”

“Somewhere on the mighty ocean. But don’t ask me where. Over.”

“When did you sail from Mill Creek?” Uncle plied him with questions, but Loopy’s replies were vague and unsatisfactory. Gradually two things emerged from his disjointed answers: Loopy was lost, and Loopy was thirsty.

“Haven’t you any water?” asked Uncle George. “Sure,” said Loopy, “but I can’t reach it.”

“What’s the matter?”

“I can’t reach it, I’m stuck—I can’t get out—I’m stuck——” The voice trailed away, and though Uncle tried and tried he got no further reply. “His batteries may have run down,” he said eventually, “or he’s gone off his proper wave-length.” He sat down heavily. “I thought things were going too well! Now what on earth has he done this time? He says he’s lost, and he’s stuck, and he’s thirsty. Hand me the *Yachting Times*, Binnie. Perhaps we can ‘reconstruct the crime,’ as they say.”

He poured over the drawing of *Easter Egg* and read out extracts of her description. Presently he said: “Ah! This looks like it, listen! ‘The hatches—two in number—are self-closing and completely pressure-tight—like those

of a submarine—being circular in shape and spring-controlled. They can be opened by pressing a button.' That's it! He's stuck down below. The hatches have jammed and he can't get out."

"But," said Mary, "why is he thirsty? Surely his water pump is *inside* the boat?"

Uncle nodded. "You've got something there, Mary. He's in; he can't get out; and he can't get anything to drink."

"He's bound to have some Coca-Cola anyway, or one of those drinks," said Mark; "he's awfully fond of it."

"Then there's only one solution that fills the bill," said Uncle. "He's caught his clothes in the self-closing hatch and can't reach the drinks, but"—he peered at the drawing and pointed triumphantly at the position of the radio telephone marked on it—"he *can* just reach the radio telephone, and that's why his voice keeps fading away!" Uncle George was pleased with his deduction, which was well up to Sherlock Holmes at his best. "I can almost see him," he said; "the flap of his wind-cheater caught under the hatch, so that he can't stretch far enough to press that infernal button!"

"What makes you so certain?" asked Mary. Her heart was sinking at the thought of their friend, trapped in a boat, alone on the high seas, and slowly perishing of thirst.

"It nearly happened to a friend of mine," said Uncle. "He had to take a bit of his engine apart to renew a leaking joint—it's called a Gasket——. Well, he did the job, replaced the joint, screwed on the cylinder heads, and was so pleased with himself that he collected all the tools he'd used and threw them into the cockpit; out of reach. And then he tried to stand up and found he couldn't. He was trapped! He'd nipped a fold of his canvas trousers under the cylinder head and there he was, screwed to the engine, and all his tools out of reach. He couldn't wriggle out of his trousers, he couldn't tear them, and if I hadn't come along he'd still be there. That is why I think that Loopy is in the same position."

"But much worse," wailed Mary. "He's at sea."

Uncle George put out his hand and took the receiver down from his radio set. After consulting the handbook on how to send out an S O S, he spoke to the station at Niton, Isle-of-Wight, giving all the details he could and an approximate position in which *Easter Egg* might be expected to be found. A few minutes later they heard Niton calling all ships and knew that the search was on.

By this time, of course, they had missed the weather forecast, but there was no need for it! It was easy to see that the wind was dropping with the sun and that a sea mist was rapidly forming. "It's going to be foggy tonight," said Uncle. "We'd better motor into Brixham before it comes down too thick."

"Oughtn't we to search for Loopy?" said Mary. Uncle thought for a while. At last he said: "You're quite right, Mary. If anything serious happened to him we'd never forgive ourselves for scuttling into harbour. We may not be able to do any good, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't try."

"Oh, good!" said Mark. "At least we can feel we're doing something. I don't like to think of the poor chap stuck in his boat. What shall we do?"

Uncle consulted the chart. "According to what he said and allowing for the light wind he's had," he said, "he's somewhere within ten miles of a spot about here." He pointed to the chart where he had made a cross. "Only fifteen miles south of the Portland Race," said Mark. "If the wind comes up he'll be blown straight into it!" It looked pretty bad; but Uncle reassured them as best he could.

"Every ship in the Channel is now looking for Loopy," he said; "what's more *Easter Egg* is made of aluminium, and gives a good Radar Echo. So don't fret yourselves too much. He'll be found. As I said before that youngster has as many lives as a cat. You mark my words, he'll come through. I only hope he doesn't do it at our expense."

"What do you mean?" asked Mary.

"I was thinking once more of what the Chinese say about rescuing a drowning man," said Uncle.

As darkness fell the fog came down; they sailed through it towards Loopy's estimated position with an almost imperceptible breeze, which filled the sails and kept them moving slowly. Uncle was unwilling to use the motor because he had not a great deal of petrol on board and also because he wanted to hear any ships which might also be sent on an errand of mercy.

At nine o'clock they were surprised to hear that Loopy was in the news. A smooth-voiced announcer said: "Aircraft and surface vessels have been warned to be on the look-out for the yacht *Easter Egg* whose owner has appealed for help. It is believed that he is trapped below, and cannot reach his water supply."

This announcement cheered them up considerably, somehow. They felt less cut-off from their fellow creatures and were pretty certain that somebody would find Loopy before it was too late. But as the fog thickened, and turned moist, they began to think that there would be no chance of anyone sighting an unlighted yacht in darkness, and little enough when the sun rose.

So they travelled on through the eerie blackness, listening to the fog-horns of many ships which were passing; some of them were quite close and made them feel nervous. If anybody had said "Why not give up the search and leave it to others?" I think they would have agreed; but nobody did, for Uncle George wasn't a man who changed his mind every time the bell struck. They were committed to this search and held on, straining their ears and eyes and thinking their own thoughts.

At midnight the B.B.C. said, of Loopy: "The search for the missing yacht continues, but poor visibility hampers the work of the searchers."

Uncle George didn't leave the cockpit and arranged that Mark and Mary should take two hours each during dark hours with him in case of any emergency.

Once or twice the sound of powerful Diesel engines could be heard. "R.A.F. Air-sea Rescue Craft, as like as not," said Uncle.

Mary brought him up a steaming cup of cocoa, and they had a yarn about things as the warm and comfortable liquid took away some of the gloom with which the situation had visited them.

"What are the chances of finding him?" asked Mary.

"The same chance as there is of finding a needle in a haystack," said Uncle; "that is unless there's somebody about with Radar. You'd have to hit *Easter Egg* before you saw her in this pea-souper."

It really was thick now. Mark heard their conversation, and crept quietly up to join them. "I heard you talking and I couldn't sleep," he said. Mary gave him half her cocoa and they sat drinking and listening and thinking of Loopy's predicament.

By half-past one there came a gradual change in the weather. It was still thick, but the fog had begun to move under the influence of a south-westerly breeze which steadily freshened until *Rag Doll* was pounding along at full speed.

Uncle George went to the chart and plotted his position on it. "Ten miles to go to the centre of the area of search," he said; "but with this wind we must allow quite a lot of drift for *Easter Egg*. The chances are she's got sail on her and is heading north-east on a zigzag course." He looked anxiously at the barometer and shook his head. "An unmanageable ship with full sail and no one at the helm," he said; "we shall have our work cut out to catch her, even if she's where we think she is."

"It's lifting in patches," called Mark, who had taken the tiller. Uncle came out into the cockpit and peered into the murk. "Optimist!" he grunted. They sailed on.

Then, down to the southward, they heard the thud-thud of heavy engines. A ship was passing only a few hundred yards away but they saw nothing of her. The

sound of her engines was rhythmical—"Um-cher-cher-cher, Um-cher-cher-cher, Um-cher-cher-cher," they went.

"Sounds like the bass accompaniment to one of those minuet things," Mary said.

"Shut up!" barked Mark. "Quiet!" His voice was so peremptory and strained that Mary did as she was told. This must be urgent, or he wouldn't have shouted at her like that. Presently he called to Uncle George, who was poring again over the chart as if he were trying to read into it something which, if interpreted, would give him the answer he wished for. Uncle was up in a moment.

"What was it?"

"I heard a sort of crash and a splintering noise—over there—where that ship was! It might have been——" He broke off. "There, there," he said; "there's somebody there." A thin wailing sound was coming over the water. Three short blasts—three long ones and then three short ones.

"S O S," said Mark, "on a yacht's fog-horn."

"I'll take her!" Uncle George took the tiller. Orders flew from his lips: "In sheets." "Turn on the petrol." "Get some fenders ready!" "Get the hand-searchlight up on deck! I'm going to alter course to starboard!"

Now the training they'd received at Cowes came in handy. Binnie and Ben, hearing the bustle and noise, quietly turned out and came on deck to help.

"Hoot! Hoot! Hoot!" went the distant fog-horn as *Rag Doll* rounded up to the wind and steered straight for the direction from which the sound was coming. "Hoot! Hoot! Hoot!"

With a soft roar the engine started as Mary pushed the starter button. Mark was up on deck, hanging on with one hand while Ben shone the hand-searchlight out ahead. The thin beam showed for a few yards only and then seemed to come up against a wall of fog.

Suddenly, out of this curtain of white mist something appeared—they had a momentary vision of an odd-looking

boat with a gash in her side, her sails in rags, and her crumpled mast leaning drunkenly over her side. On deck a thin figure was pumping the handle of a fog-horn. Ben's searchlight flickered on the scene for a brief moment, and then, once more, the white curtain descended as they charged away from the wrecked boat. "Down all sail!" roared Uncle George. They all jumped to haul the wet canvas down, as *Rag Doll* came head to wind. It was quick work, and as soon as a few turns of line had subdued *Rag Doll's* mainsail, Uncle put the motor into gear and took her back on the opposite course to that which she had been on when she had sighted the wreck. Mark took the searchlight from Ben, and crouched in the bows straining his eyes and ears.

Suddenly he heard the faint "Hoot! Hoot! Hoot!" and shone the light in the direction of the sound.

"Right ahead, Uncle!" he called. "Stop! Stop! We're ramming her!" He was too late. There was a shuddering jar and a crashing noise. *Rag Doll* stopped almost dead. Mark could see nothing more than a cabin-top, and some crumpled canvas. Then a familiar voice said, "Quick! Give me your hand. She's going!" He leaned down and saw Loopy's upturned face, white with fatigue and fear. He caught hold of his hand and pulled as hard as he could. Loopy gave a tremendous heave and nearly pulled him over the side; but he gritted his teeth and hung on. "One more pull and I've got you." He grunted with the effort. "Heave!" Loopy got his other arm on the gunwale and Uncle George, leaving Mary at the tiller, ran forward and pulled him in. At the same moment a great bubble of air framed and fizzed round *Rag Doll's* bows, as *Easter Egg*, mortally damaged in the first collision which had miraculously released the imprisoned Loopy from down below, sank to the bottom of the sea.

Chapter Seventeen

AND SO TO BRIXHAM

IT was quite extraordinary the way Loopy recovered from his terrifying experience. One minute he had been within an ace of a watery death, following an agonising period of thirst and confinement, and yet, a little later, he was sitting up in *Rag Doll's* saloon, dressed in some spare clothing of Mark's, eating enormously of bacon and eggs, and drinking pints of cold water. You couldn't but admire a man of such resilience; he just brushed his past troubles away and talked, and talked, and talked, while the Green Sailors sat round and watched him.

It had happened the way that Uncle George had thought; the patent self-closing hatch had caught a fold of Loopy's clothing, high up in the small of the back, and he had half hung in this uncomfortable position for over twelve hours. By leaning forward and straining himself he had been able to switch on his radio telephone, but he could only talk into it by holding the mouthpiece at arm's length. "Oh boy!" he said. "When I heard the Commander's voice I could have danced a jig, only I wasn't in a position to do so and then I dropped the receiver, and that was the end."

"Poor Loopy," said Mary.

"And then I heard your radio broadcast, and all the ships kept calling me, but I couldn't reach the set anyhow. I just hung like an old overcoat on a peg and waited to be found. Then I heard the fog-horns all round me, and I guessed I was in a bad spot. And then, suddenly, I heard a ship coming straight at me, and I said a little

prayer. And then, the crash came, and threw *Easter Egg* right over on her side. It made a terrible noise as she scraped along the other ship, and a lot of water started to come in. Then I found I was free, and dashed up on deck and started to play tunes on the old fog-horn——”

“And jolly lucky you did,” said Mark; “I shouldn’t have heard you otherwise.”

Loopy held out his hand, and took Mark’s. “It seems that I’m kind of making a habit of getting rescued by the Green Sailors,” he said; “sort of Guardian Angels—that’s what you are. Some day I hope to do you all a good turn.” He stretched himself and said, “Gee! I’m tired,” and fell asleep, with his head on the cabin table. They lifted him on to the settee, laid him out straight, and covered him with a rug. “He’ll be all right when he wakes up,” said Uncle George.

Rag Doll was now heading for Brixham, about thirty miles distant. There was less wind than there had been, and a light drizzle was falling. It was going to take some time to get in, so Uncle George got on the radio telephone and reported the rescue and the loss of *Easter Egg*.

Almost immediately a News Agency was on to *Rag Doll*, asking for details of the adventure, and the names of everybody, including Polly-the-Parrot. The man who telephoned was most indignant because Uncle George refused to wake up Loopy. He said he wanted to offer him a sum of money for the exclusive rights to publish his life story, but Uncle George rang off and went up on deck to inspect the weather. With so much shipping about he would not leave the cockpit until daylight came, just after 5 a.m. It was a dull grey dawn. The wind was going light all the time, so Uncle George started the engine, pulled down the foresail and pinned the main sheet amidships. “There’s about four gallons of petrol in the tank,” he said; “when that runs out there’s a can in the after-compartment.” With that he left Mark at the tiller, and went down for a nap.

By eight o'clock the weather had improved—the rain had stopped, and the clouded sky showed signs of breaking. Mary was busy in the galley getting breakfast, when Loopy suddenly sat up and said, "Well I'll be darned; it wasn't a dream!" He stretched himself, sniffed the aroma of toast and coffee, and went cheerfully on deck, where they heard him chatting blithely to Mark.

Uncle George opened an eye and said: "Keep an eye on that fellow, Mary. He'll be up to something if he gets the chance. Remember what happened last time!" Then he turned over and went to sleep again, for it had been a long and difficult night and breakfast wasn't quite ready. That was the advantage that Uncle had over his crew. He could sit, or lie down and go straight to sleep, and if anyone called him he could get straight up and be alert in a moment; whereas the Greens took anything up to a quarter of an hour to really come to after a snooze.

Meanwhile, Mary was getting a wonderful repast ready, and the galley smells were most inviting. Binnie and Ben were soon up and were sitting ready at the table, waiting for the first course of hot porridge. As it arrived Uncle sat up too as if someone had pressed a button to wake him.

Mary went to the after-hatch and called "Breakfast!" and as she did so the engine stopped.

"There's a can in the after-compartment," shouted Uncle George, with his mouth full of toast. "O.K., Uncle," called Mark.

Uncle told Mary to put the primus stove out while petrol was being poured into the tank in the cockpit. "No naked lights anywhere, when you're handling petrol," he said and called up the hatch: "Let us know when we can light up again."

Mark came into the "dog-house" for a moment. "Shan't be a minute, Uncle," he said; "Loopy's just putting it in."

"What!" Uncle sat bolt upright. "I didn't want that

young man to do anything while he's aboard *Rag Doll*. I thought I told you that!"

"You told me, Uncle," said Mary; "not Mark."

"Well," said Uncle quietly, "from now on, nothing at all is to be done by him. I've got a sort of feeling that that lad's unlucky—that's all. You can be tactful and not hurt his feelings, but don't let him be anything more than a passenger. Savvy?"

Mark grinned and said "Savvy!" Then he went back into the cockpit to be tactful but almost at once they heard him give a wail of dismay.

"What is it, Mark?" shouted Uncle George. Mark's woebegone face appeared in the hatchway. "It's my fault," he began, "I should have told him which can was petrol and which was water!"

Uncle George groaned. "Don't tell me!" he said. "Don't tell me that that young lunatic has poured water into our petrol tank! Don't tell me that!"

"It's my fault," said Mark.

"No," said Uncle. "It was only what I expected. It's mine."

There was a gloomy silence. Water in the petrol tank was not exactly a calamity, but it was an infernal nuisance, for the tank would have to be cleaned out before the engine would go again, and this operation would involve the dismantling of part of the cockpit.

Loopy, of course, was contriteness itself—for at least five minutes. Mary caught Uncle's eye for a moment and saw that he was thinking some very hard thoughts about their visitor. She had a feeling that it would be a good thing to get him out of *Rag Doll* as soon as possible before Uncle George said what he was thinking. At that moment Mark reported the appearance of a motor-boat, flying the pennant of the News Agency. She came alongside and a forceful type of man demanded to be shown the shipwrecked mariner.

"Take him," said Uncle George; "he's all yours."

Loopy protested that he was quite happy to "mosey

along in *Rag Doll*," but Mary shook her head at him, and so, with a weary sigh, he jumped into the motor-boat, which set off for Brixham at a handsome speed.

Uncle George lit his pipe and said: "For this relief much thanks. Now I shall enjoy my breakfast."

Chapter Eighteen

THE BATTLE OF BRIXHAM HARBOUR

SOME four hours after Loopy had departed, somewhat unwillingly in the News Agency motor-boat, *Rag Doll* crept under sail into Brixham in the lightest of light breezes, and came to anchor in the outer harbour. No sooner had she done this than she was surrounded by small boats, whose occupants took many photographs, and afterwards came alongside to ask hundreds of questions.

By evening the Greens knew what it was like to be "in the news." Photographs of all of them appeared in the papers. "It's funny," said Mary; "to think that Daddy and Mummy are probably looking at us at home."

Uncle George stopped the work he was doing in the cockpit to dismantle the woodwork so as to be able to get at the petrol tank, and looked very thoughtful. "Yes," he said at length; "our little dodge to give that fellow Paggott the slip has failed. As soon as we've mended this tank we'll up hook and lose ourselves afresh before he turns up here."

It was a very complicated job, getting at the petrol tank, which had been built into *Rag Doll* in such a way that a lot of careful work must be done to avoid damaging the wood. Uncle George's tools, moreover, were not very suitable for the job, but after a long struggle he succeeded in taking off one of the cockpit seats and thus exposing the top of the petrol tank, part of which was removable. By means of a small spanner the nuts securing this detachable part were unscrewed and it was lifted off, leaving a round aperture at least nine inches across, through which it was possible to put an arm, and so to clean the inside of the tank.

"We shall have to wipe it absolutely dry," said Uncle; "or else we shall have endless trouble with the engine. One bead of water in the carburettor, and it's likely to stop the whole blessed thing."

Mary delved in her rag-locker and produced a variety of cloths. Uncle picked one up and made it into a sort of pudding. With a teacup he proceeded to bail out most of the water that Loopy had poured into the tank until he had got all he could, and then, using the "pudding" as a sort of sponge, he gradually mopped up the remainder, until it began to look a good deal healthier. After that he got an electric torch, and started to examine the interior of the tank. Almost at once he gave a grunt of astonishment. "Hullo!" he said. "What's this?"

They crowded round him as he bared his arm to the elbow and fished inside the tank. "Careless workman left something in the tank," he said. "Might have blocked the petrol pipe. Good job we found it." He pulled something out, a sort of brown slimy mess, oozing with moisture.

"What on earth is it?" asked Mary.

Uncle George put the object on the floor of the cockpit and poked it with his finger. "It's leather," he said eventually; "chamois leather—that accounts for its slimy touch." He picked it up and squeezed it. There was a sort of gritty sound as he held it in his fist. "By jove," he said, "it's a leather bag! Somebody's purse, by the look of it." Mary took it out of Uncle's hand and examined it.

"It's not a purse," she said; "look, the end is sewn up."

She felt in her pocket and found her pair of scissors in their case. "Shall I cut it open?" she asked. Uncle nodded. Mary gave a few snips at the coarse stitching and slid open the little bag. "It's full of little stones," she said.

"Be careful with them," said Uncle. "And bring them down to the saloon."

In the glare of all the lights they could muster the

contents of the bag were tipped on to the table. A small handful of darkish coloured stones, such as are used for making asphalt surfaces, rattled on the table together with a short length of rusty iron. "What a swiz!" said Binnie. "I was sure they were going to be diamonds."

"What makes you think they are not?" asked Uncle George, who was far more excited than his young friends.

"You mean they are?" said Mark.

"Looks like it," said Uncle George. "Uncut diamonds. Quite a nice little haul."

He scooped them up carefully as he spoke and put them back in the little sack. Then he examined the piece of rusty iron.

"But——" said Mary.

"But who?" said Mark.

"I know," said Binnie. "Mr. Paggott hid them there—that's it, isn't it, Uncle?"

"Looks like it again," said Uncle George.

"How did he get them in?" asked Mary. "He was never on board long enough to unscrew all that stuff that you've just done."

"He wouldn't have had to," said Uncle. "He could have dropped this little bag into the tank through the filler hole."

"But how did he expect to get them out?"

Uncle George picked up the piece of rusty metal, and carried it into the cockpit where he placed it close to the binnacle containing the compass. "Watch the compass card," he said. They watched, and saw it moving quite quickly.

"A magnet!" said Mark.

"Pretty powerful one for its size," said Uncle; "it would have to be to pull its own weight, and a bag full of diamonds."

"I don't understand," said Mary.

"This is my explanation," said Uncle; "of course I may be wrong. I think that Paggott dropped them in the tank so that we could smuggle them to Mill Creek for him and it was his intention to slip aboard when we weren't

looking and with a long steel magnet, to fish in the tank for the bag. This magnet here would be attracted to his and he could drag the little bag under the filler cap and then fish it out with a hooked wire. It shouldn't have taken very long, but he never got a chance to do the job before someone turned up."

"Are they valuable?" asked Mark.

"I can't say from the look of them," said Uncle; "but Paggott has certainly gone to tremendous lengths not to be caught with them on him. It may be that they were not acquired honestly; perhaps they were the proceeds of a robbery, or perhaps it was just a plain smuggling job. Just a minute!" He went out into the cockpit where it was now dark and shone his torch again into the interior of the long tank. "Aha!" he called. "I've found two more bags. This is more like it!" He returned with the rest of his find and spread them out on the table too. Then he swept them all up and put them in his pocket. "This is important!" he said. "I'm going ashore to talk to the police. I want you to finish cleaning out the tank and then to replace the woodwork. Get the dinghy alongside, somebody."

"Don't be long, Uncle!" said Mary. "Will you?"

"Why, what's the matter?" asked Uncle.

"If they're valuable Mr. Paggott may get impatient," said Mary. "Supposing he came tonight and you weren't here? He'll know by the evening papers where we are. I'm frightened."

"He wouldn't dare," said Uncle; "but anyway I won't be long." Then he stopped and returned to the saloon. He emptied all the diamonds into a handkerchief and filled the wash-leather bags with an assortment of small screws from his store in the bos'n's locker. "Put these back in the tank," he said and if, just in case, Mr. Paggott, or any of his friends come let them help themselves—then they won't do you any harm. How's that? If anything unpleasant should happen while I'm ashore, burn a red flare and someone will answer your distress signal." He

got into the dinghy, taking an electric torch with him, and paddled away in the direction of the inner harbour. They all began to feel very lonely and a little scared, for when it is dark it is so easy to imagine that there are bad men about, even when you haven't just found a hoard of illicit diamonds. Brixham harbour was very dark; a few riding-lights were the only illumination to be seen. The harbour was deserted, for most of the fishing-boats were out and the pleasure boats were now moored up for the night. They sat in the cockpit and watched Uncle George's flashing torchlight disappear round the end of the inner harbour. Then they felt even lonelier.

To prevent themselves from getting really jumpy Mark switched on some noisy dance music while he carefully wiped out the remainder of the petrol tank, put the bags in, replaced the top, and screwed the woodwork into position. When that was finished they cleaned up the cockpit and looked at the clock. Uncle had been gone an hour.

"Sit down, sit down, sit down, you're rocking the boat!" sang the radio. It was a jolly tune and well sung, and presently they joined in. After that they felt much more cheerful, and less apprehensive. It was a warm evening, and they began to feel pleasantly drowsy as the dance music, which so often sounded very ordinary, took on a new and magical note, as it echoed out across the now mirror-like waters.

Then a discordant sound interrupted the soft crooning melody which was pouring, like golden syrup, from the loud-speaker. It was a cross between a splash, a gasp and a swish, and it came from the direction of the dark shore on which only a few street lamps now shone at the top of beetling cliffs.

"Listen!" said Mark. "Turn off the radio, Mary!"

Mary turned it off and the sound became quite evident. "It's somebody swimming," said Mark. He felt in the cockpit for a handy weapon, and his fingers closed on one of the sheet-winch handles.

"Splash! Splash! Splash!" went the sound. It was coming nearer all the time. It was sinister and unnerving to think of *someone*, or *something*, coming at them out of the darkness.

"Shall we burn a flare," said Mary; "just in case?"

"All right," said Mark; "we can always say we did it for fun like we did at——" He broke off. "Oh golly!—there aren't any flares! I burnt the whole lot after the fireworks at Cowes. I had meant to tell Uncle, but I forgot!"

"What about the radio telephone?" said Mary. "Hush!" said Mark. "Listen!" A strained and panting voice came over the water as the splashing ceased for a moment.

"*Rag Doll—Rag Doll!*" "It's Loopy!" said Mary, with delighted relief in her voice. "What a funny time to have a swim!"

"Is that you, Loopy?" shouted Mark. Back came an answering, "Sure it's me—don't yell, I'm coming."

A few seconds later they saw Loopy and as soon as he was within reach willing hands leaned over and pulled him aboard. He was pretty well out of breath, but soon recovered.

"Now listen, you Greens," he said. "That guy Paggott's around. I met him ashore. He was his usual slimy self, and all over me, and I guess I shot my mouth off. Anyway, I told him the story same as I told the News Agency, and then I went on to say what a bighead I'd been, slopping water into your gasoline tank. And with that he got very wild. I don't know what it's all about but that bit of news hit him for a home run."

"We know why," said Mark, and told Loopy about the diamonds. "So you see," he said triumphantly, "he's too late, Uncle's taken them ashore!"

"So that's all right!" said Mary.

Loopy rubbed himself with the towel she had provided. "I'm not so sure about that," he said. "You see, Clarence Paggott don't know that you've found the stuff already. I heard him on the phone to some guys he seems to know

around here. He didn't know I was listening, of course, otherwise I wouldn't be here now."

"But what did he say?"

"*'We'll get them tonight!'* I reckon that means that they're coming to get what they think is in your gasoline tank, before you find out tomorrow, when you have it cleaned out, that it's full of diamonds."

"Tonight!" Mark's voice sounded a little unsteady.

"They may be here any moment," said Loopy; "I heard him say that they've got a fast launch. Now listen! Don't let on that you know anything about the diamonds, or that you've cleaned out the tank, and don't get on that radio telephone—they probably have someone listening in for you all the time. Act like you was a parcel of kids and stall them all you know while I go to get help."

"What's stall them mean?" asked Mary.

"Delay things—you know—act like you're being helpful, and then do something unhelpful. Got it?"

Mary nodded.

"I'm going to swim back now," said Loopy; "and I'll go straight to the police. What we want to do is catch them on board, here, *Rag Doll*, working on your gasoline tank. That would be enough evidence to get them all arrested. O.K.?"

"Don't be long," said Mark; "we shan't be able to delay them much if they really make up their minds."

"O.K.," said Loopy. "By the way that guy Pingleton's with them, and so is Macgreggor; so watch out!" With that he dived over the side, and swam hastily away.

There was silence for a while and then Binnie said: "I wish Uncle was here." Mark snorted: "You're always wishing for adventures," he said; "and now you've got one you don't like it. There's nothing to be afraid of. All you've got to do, Binnie, is to act as if you're a bit gone in the head (that shouldn't be difficult—considering you are)—like that time you played the goat with old Luff Schooling, remember?"

Binnie cheered up. "Oh, lovely!" she said.

"What do I do?" asked Ben next.

"Ask questions," said Mark. "Just keep saying 'Why?' There's nothing infuriates people so much."

"Why?" said Ben.

"Because——" began Mark furiously and then laughed. "See what I mean?"

"What are *you* going to do?" asked Mary. Her teeth were nearly chattering, but she managed to sound business-like and practical. "I haven't quite made up my mind yet," said Mark; "but have you a bottle of red stuff in the galley?"

"Cochineal," said Mary; "half a small bottle, how's that?"

"Fine; keep it handy—if everything else fails we'll stage an accident with lots of blood; that ought to delay them a bit."

He sat for a moment in thought and then said: "Oily rags in the pressure-cooker, put them on the stove when I tell you until they begin to stink and then I'll do the rest. Got it?"

"Got it," said Mary stoutly. She'd never seen Mark so sure of himself. He made it all sound a bit of a lark, and chased away her fears of unspeakable happenings—of kidnappings and cold-blooded murders.

"Crooks aren't half as brave as ordinary people," said Mark, "because of their guilty consciences. The only thing is—we mustn't scare them too much, or they might get the wind up and start something. We'll just jolly them along and they won't know what they're doing."

"There's a boat coming," said Mary. They soon heard it, and presently a long low vessel swooped out of the darkness and came alongside; lights flashed on the upturned faces of the Green Sailors, as three men got out and climbed aboard *Rag Doll*.

"Well, well, well," said Mr. Paggott, "if it isn't our young friends again! And where's the jolly Sailor Uncle, eh?"

"Hullo, Mr. Paggott," said Mary; "have you come to

have supper with us? We're all alone tonight. Uncle's gone to see some friends, and won't be back till late."

"Supper, eh?" said Clarence Paggott. "Not for us—too busy, I'm afraid. We've come to help you."

"Why?" said Ben.

"Because, little man, we heard that you were in trouble. A little bird told us that someone (no names no pack-drill)—someone put water in the petrol—ouch!" The speaker jumped at least six inches in the air, for Binnie had just nipped him in the thick of the leg with a pair of pliers.

"I'm a little pincher!" she said. "You did jump. He did jump, didn't he?" She turned to Mr. Pingleton and made a dive at him in the darkness. Mr. Pingleton's ouch! was even more expressive than Mr. Paggott's, and Mr. Macgreggor, who was next to be pinched, spoke at length in a highland tongue as he seized the pliers in Binnie's hand, and put them in his pocket.

"I want my pinchers," said Binnie and began to howl. Ben joined in most realistically.

"Give it back to her, Mac," hissed Mr. Pingleton; "you'll wake the whole blessed harbour."

"There, there, little miss!" said Mr. Paggott. "Take your pinchers and go and pinch your brothers and sister, eh?"

"You'd better not try," said Mark fiercely.

"Cowardy custard!" chanted Binnie. "Who's afraid of a little pinch. Take that!"

"Ouch!" said Mark. "If you do that again I'll tell Uncle when he comes back—you know you're only allowed one pinch a day!" He bent over Binnie and whispered "jolly good!"

"Come now!" said Mr. Paggott, who evidently knew (or thought he knew) that he had a special way with children. "This is no way to behave towards your benefactors."

"Why?" asked Ben.

"The fact is," said Mr. Paggott, "we saw your Uncle ashore——"

"Where?" asked Ben.

"At the Yacht Club," said Mr. Paggott patiently; "and when he told us about your unfortunate accident with the petrol tank——"

"I thought you said a little bird told you," said Ben.

"Figure of speech, boy; figure of speech," said Mr. Paggott. "We offered to help him. He wants us to take the petrol tank away, in the launch, to the workshops ashore, where they'll make a good job of it."

"Why?" asked Ben.

"Because it has to be cleaned out."

"Why does it have to be cleaned out?" asked Ben, well into his stride.

"Because," said Mr. Paggott, "it's got some nasty water in it."

"I don't think water is nasty," said Ben; "do you, Mr. Pingleton?"

"It depends where you put it," said Mr. Pingleton.

"Uncle says a little of it goes a very long way," said Binnie creeping up, "especially with whisky. Look what I've got! A needle!" She made a sudden dive at Mr. Paggott who had turned to examine the position of the petrol tank.

"Confound it!" he said. "Give us that at once!"

Binnie thrust it forward and scored a palpable hit on his thumb before he grabbed her wrist and took away the needle.

"A little over-excited," he said; "perhaps her elder sister will see that she keeps out of the way."

"Binnie, you naughty girl," said Mary, "come down at once!"

"And about time too," said Mr. Macgreggor, breathing heavily. "What that bairn needs is the sole of a slipper—where it hurts most. Now get on with the work before we have any more interruptions. Did you bring any tools, Clarry?"

"They're in the launch," said Mr. Paggott.

"I'll get them for you," said Mark, and, before anyone

could move, he'd skipped across to the other boat. "Are these them?" he said, waving something.

"Aye," said Mr. Macgreggor. "You be careful, my lad. Don't drop them!" As he said this Mary made a dart for *Rag Doll's* supply of tools, and taking them out of their usual stowage hid them under one of the settees, for she had a pretty shrewd idea what was going to happen next. No sooner had she done this than on deck she heard a wild shout from Mark, several splashes, and then Mark protesting that it hadn't been his fault.

"You infernal young jackass!" said Macgreggor, savagely.

"I was only trying to help," said Mark.

"You mind your own business!" said Macgreggor.

"It is my business," said Mark.

"Did he drop them all?" asked Mr. Pingleton.

"Aye," said Macgreggor, "the whole blessed lot!"

"Young devil——" began Mr. Pingleton.

"That will do," said Mr. Paggott; "we will have to use *Rag Doll's* set of tools. There's no harm done. Now, Miss Mary—your brother has somewhat foolishly thrown——"

"I didn't throw," said Mark aggrieved.

"I should have said 'dropped,'" said Mr. Paggott—still imperturbable—"our own tools into the sea. Therefore if you want us to dismantle your petrol tank you must lend us yours."

"Oh, certainly!" said Mary. "Now where does Uncle keep them?" She fluttered helplessly round the saloon.

"I know he keeps them somewhere," she said, "but just where I can't remember."

"Do you remember, little girl?" asked Mr. Paggott.

"I do but I shan't tell you," said Binnie.

"Not for half-a-crown?" asked Mr. Paggott.

"No," said Binnie.

"Three shillings?"

"No," said Binnie.

"Five?"

"No," said Binnie—a little regretfully.

"I know where they are," said Ben. "But you'll have to give me five shillings."

Mr. Paggott felt in his pockets and produced a few small coins. "Lend me half-a-crown will you, Mac?" he said.

"You shouldna promise to pay what you have'na got," grumbled the old Scot, as he unwillingly forked out the coin. "There," said Mr. Paggott; "now, little man, where are the tools?"

"In the tool-kit," said Ben, pocketing the money and dodging out of reach.

"And where is the tool-kit?" went on Mr. Paggott.

"Where Uncle put it," said Ben.

"And where is that?"

"I don't know," said Ben.

"Don't waste any more time," said Mr. Pingleton; "let's search the ship!"

All three men came below and started to rummage around in a manner which showed evidence of experience in such matters. While they were there Mark nipped on board their motor-launch and put into execution a plan which had been forming in his mind.

After a short while Mary decided that since the searchers were bound to find the missing tools she might as well get the credit for being a willing helper, and so, with a triumphant "Found them!" she handed over the canvas wallet in which they were neatly stowed. Mr. Paggott, as always, urbane and thoroughly parental, gave her a pat on the back and told her she was a sensible girl. If he had seen what she did next, as soon as his back was turned, he might not have been so pleased with her, for she went straight to the stove, lit it, and collecting a bundle of oily rags put them in the pressure-cooker and screwed the lid on tightly. Then she put the cooker on a flame and waited for the mixture to warm up. Presently a thin wisp of exceedingly smelly smoke escaped from the tiny vent in the top of the cooker.

"How are you getting on?" Mark had finished the job in the launch and was back in *Rag Doll* again. Mary

showed him what she'd done and he nodded approvingly. "It's a ghastly pong," he said; "let it thoroughly warm up before serving to our visitors."

"It'll ruin the Cooker," said Mary; "what will Uncle say?"

"Wait and see," said Mark.

Meanwhile, Messrs. Paggott and Company were demolishing the cockpit seat with great speed and no consideration for the future of *Rag Doll*. The sight of such wanton damage was enough to arouse feelings of anger in any decent boat-lover's heart. In Mark's case he had to restrain himself from going to the rescue of his beloved yacht. He went forward and down the fore-hatch, where Mary met him with a sizzling receptacle which was now belching a most obnoxious smell. "It's practically red hot," she said, "I daren't keep it any longer."

"O.K.," he whispered, and took it gingerly from her. Even the insulated handle was hot to the touch. "When I get aft with this," he whispered to Binnie and Ben, "I want you to make a row in the dog-house so that they all turn your way."

"O.K.," said Binnie, "we'll make a row, won't we, Ben?"

"What with?" asked her brother.

"This, of course, stupid," said Binnie. "I'll work it and you try and stop me." She pointed at an object.

"Now!" said Mary.

The three men in the cockpit had managed to wrench the wooden seat bodily from its fastenings, and the top of the tank now lay exposed.

"There's no need to take the whole thing ashore," whispered Pingleton gleefully; "we can unscrew the cover and get the stuff out."

Mr. Paggott agreed. "We'll do that and then we'll take the tank as well and drop it in the drink," he said, with a dirty chuckle. "It'll serve that fat Commander——" The rest of his sentence was never heard, for suddenly, a noise like that which a very large and very sick cow would

make, burst upon the three evil-doers with extraordinary effects. The usually imperturbable Paggott jumped about a foot in the air, and clutched his heart, as if to stop it from jumping out of his body. Mr. Pingleton's hand strayed nervously to his hip pocket, as if in search of a weapon, while Macgreggor, with an involuntary cry of "Bagpipes!" spun round to see what it was all about.

There in the dog-house was Binnie pumping furiously on the mechanical fog-horn, while little brother Ben was yelling, "Let me! Let me!"

The noise would have awakened the dead. The three men stood dazed for a moment and then, with one accord they made a rush for the dog-house to stop the noise before it aroused suspicion ashore. As they did so, Mark, with his reeking stink-pot, dashed aft, opened the little hatch over the after-compartment, threw off the quick-opening lid of the pressure-cooker, and thrust the evil-smelling thing down the open hatch. In a second he had closed it again and by the time Paggott and Company had returned to their work, after removing the fog-horn from the clutches of two screaming children, he was out of the way and awaiting developments.

They were not long making themselves known. Soon, a curling wreath of smoke found its way into the cockpit.

"Something's burning!" said Macgreggor.

"Go and see what it is," said Mr. Paggott, who was by now becoming jumpy and irritable, "instead of wasting time making obvious remarks. Of course something's burning. I can smell it myself."

"I say," came Mark's voice from the darkness, up forward, "I believe we're on fire—what shall we do?"

"Oh dear," said Mary. "Uncle will be awfully angry if we burn his boat. Where's it coming from?"

"Look!" screamed Binnie. "Smoke. We're burning! We're burning!"

"Fire! Fire!" shouted Ben. At this Polly joined in with cries of "Thieves and murderers!"

"Put it out! put it out!" cried Mary. Now the aroma

of smouldering rags was coming through the boat really nicely. It was a fine outstanding stink of bad fish-fat, hot metal and charred vegetation and it got into noses and throats.

Macgreggor, coughing violently, shouted down the hatch to Pingleton: "You'll need to hurry—she's burning all right."

"Where is it?" said Pingleton groping in the darkness, for Mary had switched out all the lights.

"Where's what?" asked Mary.

"The fire extinguisher, of course."

"Here it is, Mr. Pingleton," said Mary. She pulled the handle out and gave it a hearty squirt in the direction of Pingleton's voice.

"You infernal little brat," came a very angry voice; "I'll give you something you won't forget——" He groped blindly around the saloon. Mary and the two other Greens removed themselves into the lavatory compartment, and locked themselves in until the angry men cooled off. Meanwhile, Mark filled a bucket from the sea, removed the after-compartment hatch, tipped a little water into the pressure-cooker and a great deal more down Mr. Paggott's neck.

"Confound you, boy!" he roared. "What do you think you're doing?"

"It's all right," said Mark. "It was only a smouldering rag."

"What the dickens are you doing down there, Pingleton?" said the wrathful Paggott. "Come and give me a hand to unscrew the top of this tank."

Mr. Pingleton, swearing terribly to himself, came into the cockpit and trod heavily on Macgreggor's favourite corn.

"Get off my foot—you half-witted Sassenach," he said savagely, "blundering around like a gormless rogue-elephant."

"Cut it out!" snapped Mr. Paggott. "Don't waste any more time." He unscrewed the last of the nuts, and

stopped for a moment as he became aware that he was being watched by Mark. "Young man!" he said. "Go and look in the motor-boat for a small hand-pump to get rid of the water. You'll find it in the port-foremost corner."

It wouldn't be long now, thought Mark, as he went forward. He'd done everything he could to delay them but now there was little left to be done before the men got their hands on the bags and were free to depart. There was still the cochineal; but he decided not to use such an obvious deception which might serve to confirm any suspicions that Paggott had that the various odd happenings aboard *Rag Doll* had been deliberately contrived by the Greens. No, he decided, he must now rely on the little job that he'd done in the motor-boat.

Meanwhile Mr. Paggott had whipped off the cover of the tank, and feeling inside, found the three bags which he handed to Pingleton.

"One each," said the suspicious Pingleton; "that means we share the risk, as well as the prize, equally. You keep one, Clarry—go on."

Mr. Paggott tittered. "What a very suspicious-minded fellow you are," he said as he pocketed his bag. "Now give me a hand to wreck this petrol tank and we will leave these ghastly brats to their fat fool of an uncle."

Macgreggor's voice was nervous. "There's a boat moving in the inner harbour," he said; "I heard its engine start. Let's get awa' and don't waste any time on yon tank."

"Don't get excited," said Mr. Paggott, all smiles, now that he'd got his long-awaited booty; "I like to finish the work artistically—a touch of corroborative detail—eh? Start the launch's engine, Mac, and I'll be with you in a jiffy."

"I can't find the pump," called Mark.

"Never mind, dear boy," said Mr. Paggott, "we'll take the tank ashore as it is and well and truly fix it—won't we, Mac?"

Macgreggor was bending over the engine and said "Aye!" Then he pressed the starter-button. Then he pressed it again—and again—and yet again; but the engine remained lifeless.

"She's not starting," he said presently.

"Why not?" demanded Pingleton, testily.

"How should I know?" said Macgreggor.

"Better let me have a look," said Mr. Paggott, climbing aboard. "You finish the tank—there's one more screw to be got out."

He lifted the flap of the engine, and shone his torch inside it. Mark, watching from the deck of *Rag Doll*, saw a hard look come into his face as he spotted the cause of the trouble. He shut the flap deliberately and with a menacing gesture he leapt like a cat on to the yacht, and seized Mark by the collar. "What have you done with it?" he said. "Quickly, if you don't want to get hurt! Where is it?"

"Where's what?" Mark quailed internally. Mr. Paggott's face left him under no illusions as to what would happen next.

"The distributor head," hissed Mr. Paggott; "you took it, didn't you? Didn't you?" He caught hold of Mark's arm and twisted it viciously. Mark's cry of pain was involuntary. He had meant to bear it all in silence, but the agony was awful. Mary and Binnie and Ben heard it too. She grabbed a saucepan and crept up the fore-hatch. Pingleton saw her and called: "Watch out, Clarry—the girl's after you!" Macgreggor jumped aboard and was just in time to get two squirts from the fire extinguishers wielded by Ben and Binnie. Mary smashed the saucepan down Mr. Paggott's evil face, but he dodged it, and grabbed her arm with his free one. "Got you both," he said. "Come on—young lady if you don't want to suffer—tell that young hooligan to say what he did with it." He gave Mary's arm a twist as an earnest of worse things to come.

"Just a little more and you won't be able to play basket-

ball for a long, long time." His voice was smooth and menacing.

"I threw it in the sea," said Mark. Mr. Paggott's face was a study. For a moment he looked like wreaking a heavy vengeance on the pair of them. Then he recovered himself and let them both go. "Naughty-naughty," he said. "What your uncle will say when he finds that you've set fire to his lovely yacht—I really don't know." While they were reeling under the realisation that he meant what he said—he suddenly asked, "What sort of engine has *Rag Doll* got?" Caught off his guard, Mark answered automatically, "Gray—four-twenty-two."

"Now isn't that lucky—for you," said Mr. Paggott. "So is mine." He turned to Pingleton. "Get it," he ordered.

In a moment or two the distributor head from *Rag Doll*'s own engine had been transferred to that of the launch.

The three men, with the petrol tank, climbed aboard. The starter-button was pressed and the engine roared into life. "Let go!" shouted Mr. Paggott. Mark stood, nursing his aching arm and prayed that his other little device would be effective.

"Go on!" shouted Paggott, over the noise of the engine. Macgreggor took the wheel and put the control lever to "Ahead." The launch sprang forward. Mr. Paggott waved a derisory hand and shouted: "Kind regards to all and sundry—dear children." The launch disappeared into the darkness and Mary felt that she would like to have a good cry. They were beaten—all their efforts had been in vain—they had failed Uncle George. Then the noise of the launch, which had been steadily diminishing, suddenly cut out with a bumping sound. Mark's second device had succeeded. "It's worked!" he shouted. "It's worked! I put the lead-line over her bows, and when they went ahead it got wound round her propeller. They're stuck—they'll have an awful job freeing it."

"They'll be in an awful wax!" said Binnie. "Supposing they come back!"

"We'll shut ourselves in," said Mark; "it's no good

fighting them—they're too strong. Get down below and stand by to lock the doors and hatches!"

He stood listening to angry noises across the water, and his heart sank as a cold-blooded voice said: "... the young devils—I'll give them something to remember me by!"

Paddling noises followed. They were coming back!

For a moment Mark made up his mind to remain on deck and try to repel the boarders. Then common sense prevailed; he hustled them all below, secured the hatches and waited to see what would happen.

Whatever threats the man had made, however, and however much they felt like wringing the necks of their young persecutors, it soon became clear that they were going to concentrate solely on freeing the launch's propeller. Mr. Paggott could be heard breathing vengeance as he divested himself of his clothing, and lowered himself gingerly over the side. Unless Uncle George arrived soon the Green Sailors had lost their long-drawn-out battle. Mark had done everything he could to delay them and now, like a wise general, he had withdrawn to a prepared position, which it was unlikely that the enemy would be bothered to assault. After all, they *had* got what they had come for, though goodness knew what they would say when they opened the little bags! He only hoped that they would be far away when they did, for their baffled rage might impel them to carry out the plan at which Mr. Paggott had so evilly hinted, namely to set fire to *Rag Doll*.

It wasn't at all comfortable to be immured in the saloon, and to hear the muffled comments and ejaculations of their enemies, and to know that they were now completely at their mercy. Ben and Binnie sat together on a settee and he'd each other's hands for comfort. Mark busied himself by whittling the end of a broomstick into a sharp point with which he had some sort of idea of defending them all if the enemy broke in. Mary, to cover her feelings of panic, was washing up. Polly-the-Parrot seemed to be aware of serious happenings and kept walking up and down her perch in the cage, muttering imprecations.

Presently they heard Mr. Paggott's voice raised in anger. "You silly fool!" he said. "What did you want to drop it for? Have *you* got a knife, Macgreggor?"

"Aye, but it's a valuable one, and I dinna want to lose it," came the answer.

"Hand it over, you tight-fisted kilt-wearing Caledonian!" hissed Mr. Paggott. "What's a paltry knife, compared to the riches in those bags?"

"Oh, aye," grumbled Macgreggor; "here it is then, but recollect that it was a present from a very auld friend."

Then Pingleton's voice: "How are you getting on with that rope round the propeller?"

"Another couple of turns," answered Mr. Paggott. Then a pause. Then Mr. Paggott again: "What d'you usually use this knife for, Mac? It wouldn't cut butter." Then a longer pause, and Mr. Paggott said: "Done it!"

Then a scraping sort of noise, as Mr. Paggott was hauled aboard, and then, as he seemed to be resuming his clothing he addressed himself to the listening Greens.

"I'm a very forbearing man—and I admire a bit of spirit in the young," he said, between grunts as he experienced difficulty with putting his garments over his wet body. "But you can count yourselves lucky that I do nothing more to you than to warn you to tell that fat uncle of yours that he'd better sell this yacht and go as far inland as he can! He'll never again have a quiet night in any harbour that he enters. I, or one of my company, will always be on the look-out for *Rag Doll*, and things can happen in the night—my little ones!—things can happen in the night, and no one would ever know how they happened. Let this be my final warning—and if any of you go telling tales out of school about tonight's happenings you'll sadly regret it. We came aboard to help you to mend your petrol tank, remember—that's what you will say if you're asked—but if you say anything else—I shall hear of it and you will bitterly regret the day when you interfered with matters which are no concern of yours. And another——" The launch's engine started up with

a roar and the rest of his homily was fortunately drowned. They heard him shout "Right away!" and the grunt of the propeller as it bit into the water. Then its "whoosh-wheak" gradually died away, and they knew that they were alone.

With commendable caution Mark reconnoitred the upper deck by himself, in case Mr. Paggott had left someone on board to deal with the Greens as they emerged from their stronghold—it was just the sort of thing he might have done. There was, however, no one else on board, and so he called below that the coast was clear, and, as he did so, things began to happen a few hundred yards away. "Quick!" he cried. "Come up—they've caught them!"

Up tumbled the Greens and peering into the darkness they saw that a vessel, with a great white shaft of light which illuminated the low fast launch which had been alongside *Rag Doll* a few short minutes ago, had borne down on her quarry. There were shouts and confused engine-noises—they could see figures struggling in the glare of the searchlight and then, over the water, came the cheerful and reassuring voice of their Uncle George.

"*Rag Doll* ahoy!"

Mark cupped his hands to his mouth and answered with a "Hullo there!"

"Are you all right?" came the voice. For a moment all the things that had happened during the evening passed through Mark's mind. He felt triumphant, but suddenly very shaky—as if he had been taking part in an endless tug-of-war. And when he tried to give a reassuring answer to Uncle George—all he could manage was a croaking sort of sound. "O.K.," he shouted. Back came the reply: "We're coming alongside!" Mary automatically went down to put the kettle on and clear up the considerable confusion of the saloon, while Mark got out the torches and searchlight and lit up *Rag Doll's* upper deck.

Slowly the police launch, towing Mr. Paggott's boat, came alongside and when it was secured Uncle George and a large man in uniform stepped aboard *Rag Doll*.

The three malefactors, guarded by a bulky-looking policeman, sat in a dejected bunch in their own boat.

"Why didn't you burn the flare?" was Uncle George's first question. Mark told him. "Or use the radio telephone?" he continued.

"Loopy said 'not to,'" said Mark, "and after that things were so exciting I forgot all about it. Where is Loopy?"

"Down in the cabin—wrapped in a blanket," said Uncle. He looked at Mark's strained face. "Did they ill-treat you?" he demanded; "because if they did—I'll——"

"Please, Commander," said the inspector. "Let us hear what the young man has to tell us."

Mr. Paggott's voice—oily and full of underlying threats—came out of the darkness.

"That's right—my young friend—explain to your uncle that we came aboard to help you with your petrol tank. And don't forget what I told you." Mark felt a chill running down his spine, but he said:

"They've got the little bags."

"Search them," ordered the inspector. One by one the three men were searched but nothing was found.

"That boy's been reading too many crime stories," said Mr. Paggott. "We simply came aboard out of the goodness of our hearts, and he set about us as if we'd come to rob him."

"I heard him take them," said Mark; "he shared them out."

"So you decided to throw away a fortune—rather than risk detection—is that it?" asked the inspector. Mr. Paggott lit a cigarette. "You and I are men of the world, Inspector," he said. "And we have another thing in common. We both know our criminal law. Whatever you are suggesting—or whatever this budding detective here likes to suggest, you haven't an ounce of proof. I, on my part, have a very legitimate claim for a wrongful arrest and assault. Would you be good enough to inform

me, and my colleagues, why you have behaved in this brutal and licentious manner towards law-abiding citizens? It's a public scandal that a man in your position should take heed of a crackpot Commander, and his four moronic protégées, and a half-witted Canadian boy. What is it I am supposed to have done? Tell me—I am intrigued to know."

"You placed three bags of uncut diamonds aboard *Rag Doll* on the twenty-third ult——" began the inspector in his most official voice.

"Prove it!" said Mr. Paggott.

"—while at Cherbourg," he went on, "with intent to smuggle them to this country, concealed in the vessel's petrol tank. It was your intention to recover them subsequently and for this purpose you trespassed aboard this vessel tonight and removed, by force, a part of her equipment, namely her petrol tank."

"This is a remarkable story," said Mr. Paggott; "diamonds? And your informant is this tow-headed lad, who says he heard me share them out?"

"That is so," said the inspector.

"And you believe him?"

"Implicitly," said the inspector.

"You have made us suffer the indignity of a search of our persons," said Mr. Paggott; "and you found nothing?"

"Nothing," said the inspector.

"And you therefore suggest that we threw the diamonds away?"

"Not the diamonds," said the inspector. "You threw the little bags away—did you not?"

"What do you mean?" Mr. Paggott had had a busy evening and some of his measured manner was wearing off.

"I mean that when you were apprehended both you and your two confederates threw the leather bags which you had removed from *Rag Doll's* petrol tank, into the sea, under the impression that they contained illicit diamonds for the possession of which you knew you could be prosecuted

with the utmost rigour of the law. In fact," said the inspector, "those bags each contained a handful of small screws. The diamonds"—he tapped his hip pocket significantly—"are here!" He cleared his throat and went on: "Clarence Paggott, Wally Macgreggor and Edward Pingleton," he said majestically, "I arrest you on a charge of being concerned in a plot to avoid Customs and Excise duty by attempting to smuggle dutiable articles into this country. I warn you that any statement you may make may be used in evidence."

There was a long pause—terrifying in its intensity. Mr. Paggott's face was a study in baffled rage. Then Pingleton and Macgreggor broke the silence by simultaneous denials and assertions, the gist of which was that it was all Clarence Paggott's doing. When they had finished, the arch-criminal looked at them scornfully and then, with a show of self-possession which certainly proved him to be a man of greater stature than his mealy-mouthed accomplices, he turned to Uncle George and said: "Very foolish of me. I ought to have known that nobody could *be* such a cretinous ass as you *look*, Commander." He shifted his baleful gaze to the four Green Sailors and for a moment his eyes softened. "You're a plucky lot, if misguided," he said. "Perhaps, later, when—I—er—when we meet again, I could find useful work for young people of your strength of character. Each one of you is worth four of these miserable money-grubbing cowards."

"I wish you all good night. We shall meet no doubt—in the Halls of Justice." He bowed, stepped into the police launch and said with a cold fury in his voice: "Inspector, oblige me by keeping these miserable worms out of my reach—or I will not be answerable for their safety!"

"Pipe down!" said the inspector, rudely. "You're the worst of the lot. Shove off, men!"

The two vessels glided away into the darkness.

Uncle George watched them go.

"I remember now when I first saw that fellow Paggott,"

he said. "It was on 'D' day at Arromanches. I saw him through my glasses from the deck of my destroyer, rifling the pockets of some captured German officer prisoners while the shells and mortar bombs were bursting all round him. He's a cool enough customer. It's a pity he happens to be a crook."

He sighed for a moment. "Such a waste," he said, and then, turning to the Greens he said: "You must have done very well to have aroused his respect. Come down below and tell me all about it from the very beginning—I want to hear every word of it."

It was nearly dawn before their story was told, a midnight meal had been consumed, and they felt sufficiently unexcited to be able to lie down and sleep.

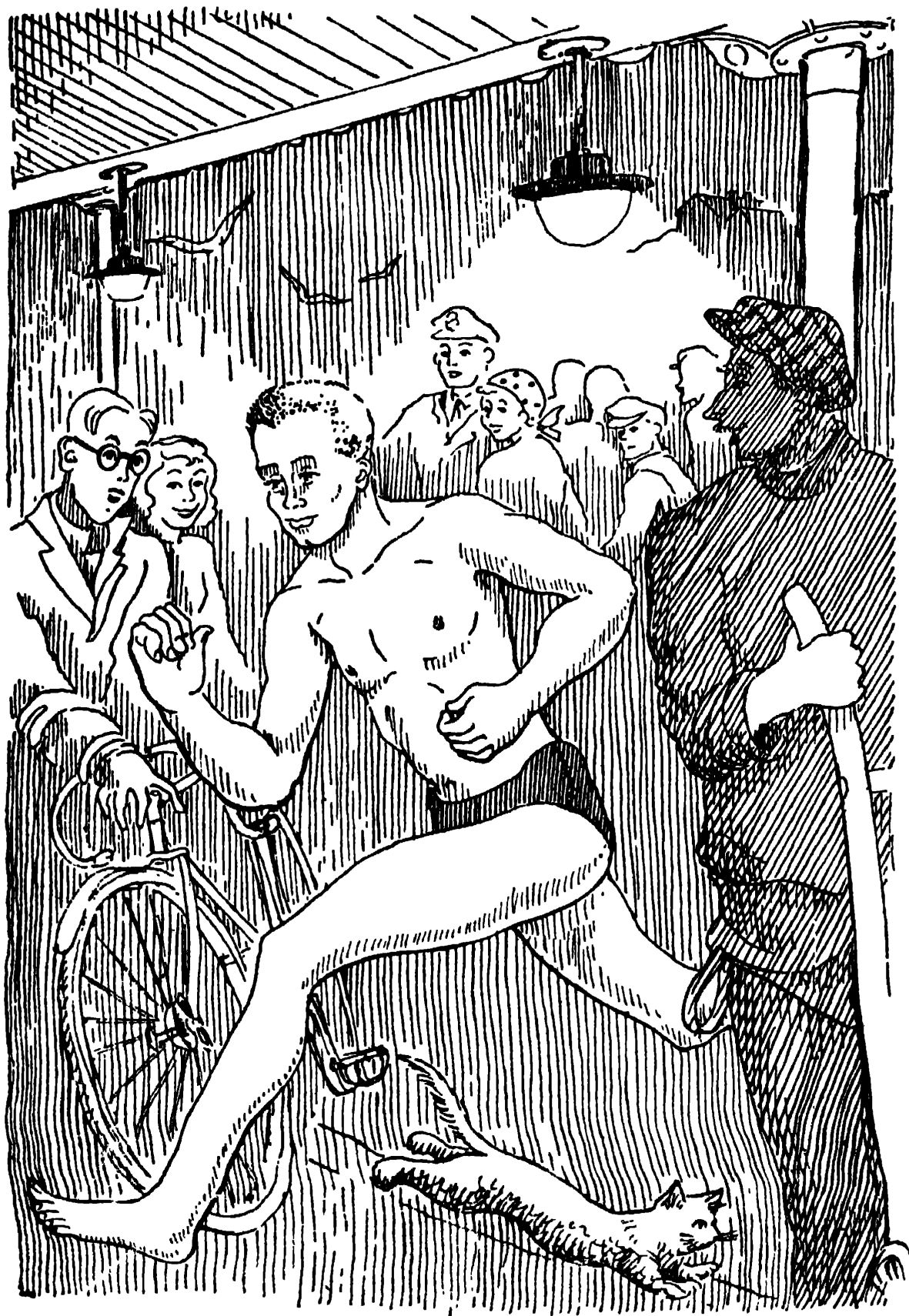
As they curled down in their blankets and sleepily saw the first grey signs of light, filtering into *Rag Doll's* saloon they felt as many a victor has felt before them after a famous victory, desperately tired and very proud of themselves. In a tiny corner of their hearts, however, they had room for the smallest spark of sympathy for these bad men who had dared much to acquire illicit riches, and must now pay for their crimes in a cold dark cell.

Chapter Nineteen

GOOD-BYE, UNTIL—?

THERE is very little left to tell of this particular adventure of the Green Sailors. By the time the repairs to *Rag Doll*'s petrol tank and the boring business of "making statements" to the police and signing them, had been completed, there wasn't very much holiday left.

But what there was left of it they thoroughly enjoyed, firstly because they no longer had that curious unpleasant feeling that Mr. Paggott, and his bad men, were lurking somewhere in the background; and secondly because Uncle George had himself thanked Loopy for his courage and good sense in swimming off to *Rag Doll*—a considerable distance, in the dark—and then swimming back to shore and running, clad only in his bathing-trunks, through the crowded markets and streets of Brixham, much to the surprise of the onlookers, bursting into the Chief Constable's office, where Uncle George had spent far too much time trying to make him realise the significance of the discovery, in the petrol tank, of a cargo which looked like stones and possibly were. "If you hadn't arrived when you did," he had said to Loopy, "we'd have missed them. You showed great powers of initiative." Loopy had grinned and said that he hoped that he had in some small way repaid the debt he owed to the crew of the *Rag Doll* in twice saving his life; and Uncle George was so pleased with the way things had turned out that before he knew what he was doing he had invited Loopy to spend the rest of the cruise aboard *Rag Doll*. And this Loopy accepted with alacrity. Mary, with a twinkle in her eye, asked Uncle George if it wasn't a bit risky, having Loopy on board in view of what the Chinese had to say on the



... Much to the surprise of the onlookers—

subject; but Uncle George pointed out that Loopy, by virtually rescuing his original preservers had broken the link which he said the Chinese called "*Chiong-Kar-Pui*" (or words to that effect) and would no longer be a life-burden to them. And so, Loopy, still wearing Mark's spare clothing, skipped aboard and settled down in the corner of *Rag Doll's* saloon underneath Polly's cage and nattered away with a will.

They visited Dartmouth, Salcombe and the River Yealm, spending a night in each of these delectable spots; and then it was time to return. As they set out Mary wondered what the voyage would bring, for the presence of Loopy was usually instrumental in causing a strange adventure; but this time, the journey, like so many homing trips at the end of a long cruise, was quiet and uneventful. A fresh breeze kicked up a considerable sea in the Channel; but they had been cruising now for some weeks, and thought little of the grey curling waves which broke under *Rag Doll's* counter and sent her skidding along as if she were a planing dinghy.

"If the weather had been like this at the beginning of the cruise," said Mark, "we'd have had the wind up. It's blowing quite hard."

"Now's the time to start on an Ocean Race," said Uncle George; "we're tough now, and thoroughly boat-worthy, but alas! the party is over!"

It wasn't quite over, however. As they entered the calm waters of the Solent and set course for Mill Creek, Uncle levelled his glasses on *Rag Doll's* home port and said something under his breath.

"What is it, Commander?" said Loopy.

"All the boats are dressed overall with bunting," said Uncle George; "as if it was the Queen's birthday, or something. I wonder why?"

They were soon to find out. It was in honour of the exploits of the *Rag Doll*. The fame of the Green Sailors had gone before them, and the local inhabitants of Mill Creek had decided to give them all a rousing welcome.

No sooner had *Rag Doll* picked up her moorings than the visitors began to arrive, and to make such complimentary speeches, so that even Polly seemed to change a little in colour!

The Mayor of Wearmouth, whose chain got slightly mixed up in Loopy's well-intentioned efforts to help him aboard, delivered a short address of welcome and then sat down to one of *Rag Doll*'s most famous teas.

Mary opened nearly every tin left in the boat and got out all her spare cups and glasses and even Uncle George's shaving-mug was pressed into service; and it was just as well she did, for the visitors kept coming, just to say "Hello!" and "Jolly good show!" But, of course, they stayed when invited to join in the feast.

Francis Podsnap and a couple of long-haired slobs came over, ostensibly to congratulate them, but actually to explain, in his high-pitched voice, how he failed to complete the course in the Fastnet Race.

Joe, of course, turned up and so did the Tiger, who spoke but twice; then Luff Schooling dropped in, dropped a precious teacup and dropped off in the corner of the saloon. He was followed by two strangely subdued Jurgen Twins, who solemnly presented autograph books, and thus finally convinced the Green Sailors that they were indeed celebrities.

Last of all of these and other callers came Mr. Furbelow and his inimitable assistant, Harold.

"No, no!" he said in response to an offer of some doubtful tea^{*} in the shaving-mug. "I am 'ere in an official capacity, as it were. Aren't I, Harold?"

"That's a fact you are!" said Harold.

"Just dropped aboard," went on Mr. Furbelow, "to convey to you, on behalf of Her Majesty's Customs and Excise, a small token of appreciation of what you have done in this here *Rag Bag*——"

"*Rag Doll*," corrected Harold.

"I said *Rag Doll*," went on Mr. Furbelow; "what you have done in this here *Rag Doll*, to rid the Channel coast of as pestilential—I say pestilential and I mean pestilential

—a band of smugglers as ever disgraced the shores of this here island.” He handed over a brown paper parcel.

Uncle George looked at it. “Anybody got a knife?” he asked.

“Cut his throat!” said Polly, who hadn’t quite got the gist of the conversation.

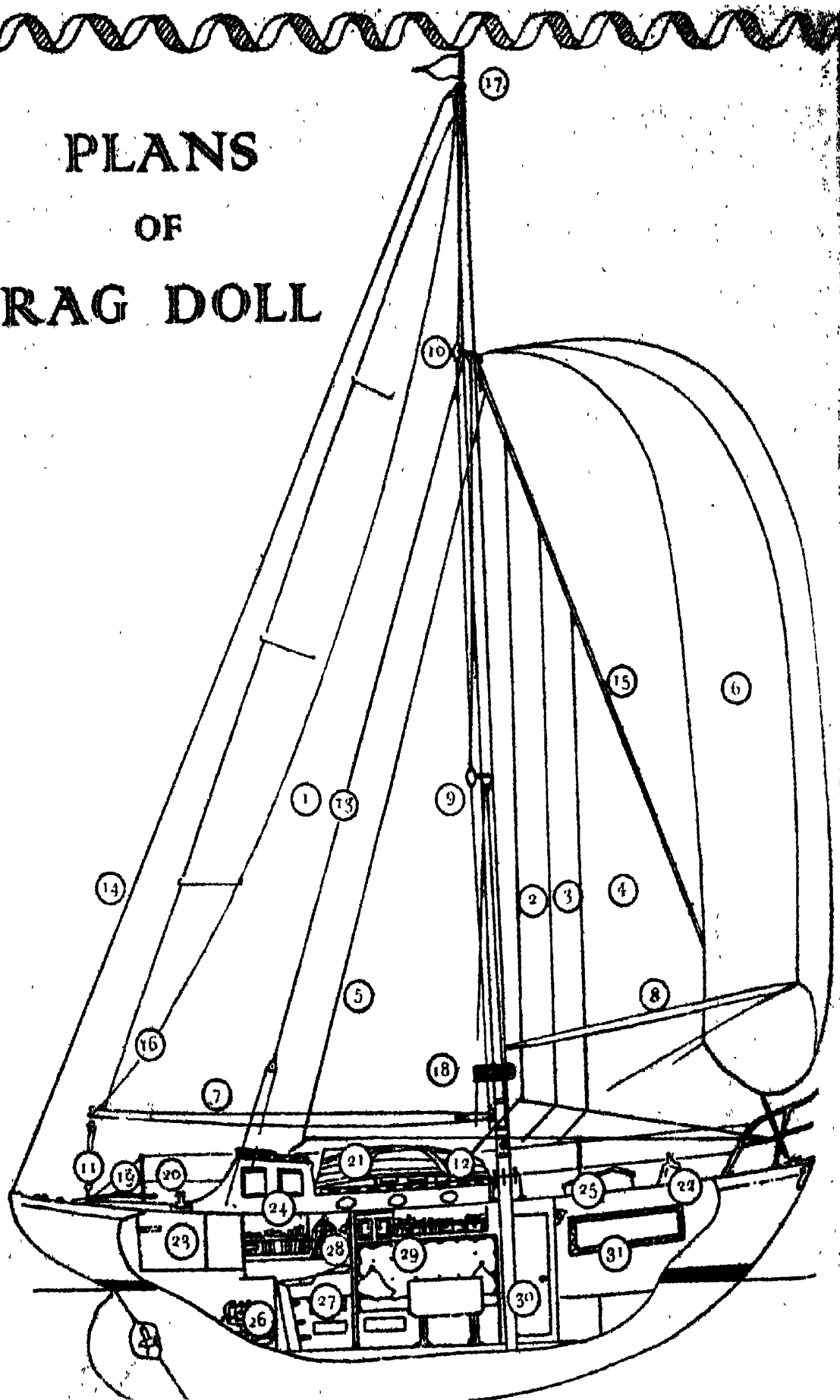
When the parcel had been opened it was a case for concealing their mirth; for the token consisted of a photograph of Mr. Furbelow, standing, with Harold on a seat beside him, looking for all the world like a ventriloquist’s doll. Uncle George, remembering his manners, successfully fought a desire to laugh and gravely thanked the two Customs gentlemen for their token.

The party went on until darkness had nearly fallen and as the last of the self-invited guests paddled away upstream, the Greens, Loopy and Uncle George stood, waving in the cockpit; meanwhile, gaunt and derelict in appearance, the *Fallen Star* lay deserted—a warning to all who passed her that honesty is the best policy, for it would be some little time before her owner and his friends would be at liberty to sail the seas on their (it is to be hoped) lawful occasions.

THE END

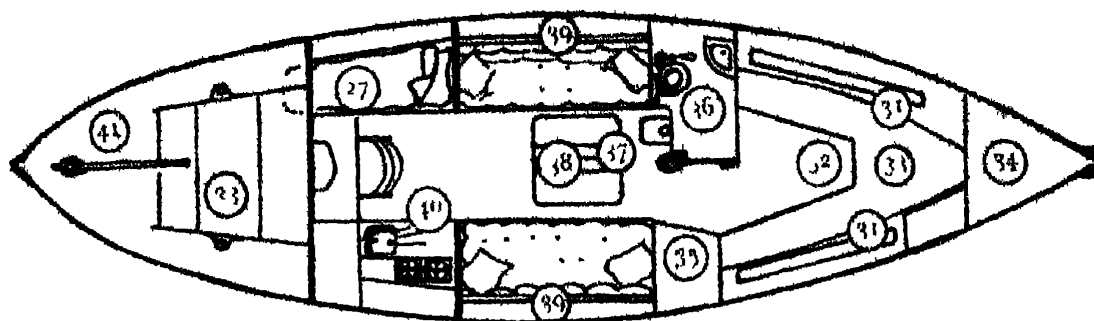


PLANS
OF
RAG DOLL



1. MAINSAIL
2. No. 1 JIB
3. No. 2 JIB

4. STORM JIB
5. GENOA JIB
6. SPINNAKER



7. MAIN BOOM
8. SPINNAKER BOOM
9. LOWER CROSS TREE
10. UPPER CROSS TREE
11. MAIN-SHEET
12. JIB SHEET (Various positions)
13. PREVENTER BACKSTAY
14. STANDING BACKSTAY
15. FORESTAY
16. TOPPING LIFT
17. BURGEE
18. SIDELIGHT SCREEN
19. TILLER
20. SHEET WINCH
21. DINGHY (Stowed for sea)
22. ANCHOR WINCH
23. COCKPIT (With engine controls and compass. All sheets lead to it)
24. COMPANION WAY LEADING TO MAIN CABIN

25. FOREHATCH
26. ENGINE (Petrol—4 cylinders)
27. UNCLE GEORGE'S BERTH
28. POLLY'S HARBOUR STOWAGE
29. MAIN CABIN
30. DOOR TO W.C.
31. FOLDING CANVAS COT
32. FOCSIT
33. CABLE STOWAGE
34. FOREPEAK (Stores)
35. WARDROBE
36. W.C. AND WASH BASIN
37. BOGIE STOVE
38. FOLDING TABLE
39. FOLDING BERTHS
40. GALLEY AND SINK
41. STERN LOCKER CONTAINING WATER AND PETROL TANKS, WARPS, SAILS AND ALL SPARE GEAR

